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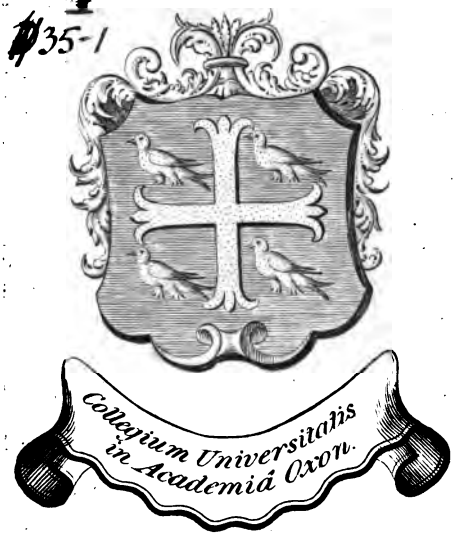

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LECTURES

ON THE

GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW;

DELIVERED IN THE

PARISH CHURCH OF ST. JAMES,

WESTMINSTER,

IN THE YEARS 1798, 1799, 1800, AND 1801.

BY THE RIGHT REVEREND

BEILBY PORTEUS, D.D.

BISHOP OF LONDON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

THE SEVENTH EDITION.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR T. CADELL & W. DAVIES, STRAND;
T. PAYNE, MEWS-GATE; *and*
F. & C. RIVINGTON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD.

1804.

Luke Hanfard, Printer,
Great Turnstile, Lincoln's-Inn Fields.

TO THE

INHABITANTS

OF

LONDON AND WESTMINSTER,

THESE LECTURES,

WRITTEN PRINCIPALLY FOR THEIR BENEFIT,

AND FAVOURED WITH THEIR UNREMITTED

ATTENDANCE FOR FOUR SUCCESSIVE YEARS,

ARE,

WITH VERY SINCERE SENTIMENTS OF REGARD

AND ESTEEM,

AND WITH FERVENT PRAYERS FOR

THEIR HAPPINESS HERE AND HEREAFTER,

INSCRIBED,

BY

THEIR FAITHFUL AND AFFECTIONATE

FRIEND AND SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE.

AT the time when the following Lectures were first begun, the political, moral, and religious state of this kingdom, wore a very unfavourable aspect, and excited no small degree of uneasiness and alarm in every serious and reflecting mind. The enemies of this country were almost every where triumphant abroad, and its still more formidable enemies at home were indefatigably active in their endeavours to diffuse the poison of disaffection, infidelity, and a contempt of the holy Scriptures, through every part of the kingdom, more especially among the lower orders of the people, by the most offensive and impious publications; while at the same time it must be acknowledged, that among too many of the higher classes, there prevailed, in the midst of all

all our distresses, a spirit of dissipation, profusion, and voluptuous gaiety, ill suited to the gloominess of our situation, and ill calculated to secure to us the protection of Heaven against the various dangers that menaced us on every side. Under these circumstances, it seemed to be the duty of every friend to religion, morality, good order, and good government, and more especially of the ministers of the Gospel, to exert every power and every talent with which God had blessed them, in order to counteract the baneful effects of those pestilential writings which every day issued from the press; to give some check to the growing relaxation of public manners; to state plainly and forcibly the evidences of our faith, and the genuine doctrines of our religion, the true principles of submission to our lawful governors, the mode of conduct in every relation of life which the Gospel prescribes to us; and to vindicate the truth, dignity, and divine authority of the sacred writings. All this, after much deliberation, I conceived could in no other way be so effectually done as by having recourse to those writings themselves, by going back to the very fountain of truth and holiness,

ness, and by drawing from that sacred source the proofs of its own celestial origin, and all the evangelical virtues springing from it, and branching out into the various duties of civil, social, and domestic life.

The result was, that I resolved on discharging *my* share of these weighty obligations, by giving Lectures on the Gospel of St. Matthew, in my own parish church of St. James, Westminster, every Friday in Lent; which, at the same time that it promoted my principal object, might also draw a little more attention to that holy but too much neglected season, which our Church has very judiciously set apart for the purpose of retirement and recollection, and of giving some little pause and respite to the ceaseless occupations and amusements of a busy and a thoughtless world. I foresaw, however, many difficulties in the undertaking, particularly in drawing together any considerable number of people to a place of public worship, for any length of time, on a common day of the week. But it pleased God to bless the attempt with a degree of success far beyond every thing I could have expected or imagined. And as I have been assured

assured that several even of those amongst my audience, that disbelieved or doubted the truth of Christianity, were impressed with a more favourable opinion both of its evidences and its doctrines, and with a higher veneration for the sacred writings than they had before entertained, I am willing to flatter myself that similar impressions may possibly be made on some of that description, who may chance to cast their eyes on these pages; and that they may also tend in some degree to confirm the faith and invigorate the good resolutions of many sincere believers in the Gospel. With this hope I now offer them to the world, and particularly to those whom Providence has placed under my more immediate superintendence, and to whom I am desirous to bequeath this (perhaps) last public testimony of my solicitude for their everlasting welfare. And whatever errors, imperfections, or accidental repetitions (arising from the recurrence of the same subjects in the sacred narrative) the critical reader may discover in this work; he will, I trust, be disposed to think them entitled to some degree of indulgence, when he reflects, that it was not a very easy task to

adapt either the matter or the language of such discourses as these to the various characters, conditions, circumstances, capacities, and wants of all those different ranks of people to whom they were addressed; and when he is also told, that these Lectures were drawn up at a very advanced period of life, and not in the ease and tranquillity of literary retirement, but at short broken intervals of time, such as could be stolen from the incessant occupations of an arduous and laborious station, which would not admit of sufficient leisure for profound research or finished composition.

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LECTURE I.

IT being my intention to give from this place, on the Fridays during Lent, a course of Lectures, explanatory and practical, on such parts of Scripture as seem to me best calculated to inform the understandings, and affect the hearts of those that hear me, I shall proceed, without further preface, to the execution of a design, in which edification not entertainment, usefulness not novelty, are the objects I have in view; and in which, therefore, I may sometimes perhaps avail myself of the labours of others, when they appear to me better calculated to answer my purpose than any thing I am myself capable of producing.

Although my observations will for the present be confined entirely to the Gospel of St. Matthew, and only to certain select parts even

of that, yet it may not be improper or unprofitable to introduce these Lectures by a compendious view of the principal contents of those writings which go under the general name of the HOLY SCRIPTURES.

That book which we call THE BIBLE (that is, THE BOOK, by way of eminence) although it is comprised in one volume, yet in fact comprehends a great number of different narratives and compositions, written at different times by different persons, in different languages, and on different subjects. And taking the whole of the collection together, it is an unquestionable truth that there is no one book extant, in any language, or in any country, which can in any degree be compared with it for antiquity, for authority, for the importance, the dignity, the variety, and the curiosity of the matter it contains.

It begins with that great and stupendous event, of all others the earliest and most interesting to the human race, the creation of this world, of the heavens and the earth, of the celestial luminaries, of man, and all the inferior animals, the herbs of the field, the sea and its inhabitants. All this it describes with

with a brevity and sublimity well suited to the magnitude of the subject, to the dignity of the Almighty Artificer, and unequalled by any other writer. The same wonderful scene is represented by a Roman poet*, who has evidently drawn his materials from the narrative of Moses. But though his description is finely imagined and elegantly wrought up, and embellished with much poetical ornament, yet in true simplicity and grandeur, both of sentiment and of diction, he falls far short of the sacred historian. LET THERE BE LIGHT: AND THERE WAS LIGHT; is an instance of the sublime, which stands to this day unrivalled in any human composition.

But what is of infinitely greater moment, this history of the creation has settled for ever that most important question, which the ancient sages were never able to decide; from whence and from what causes this world, with all its inhabitants and appendages, drew its origin; whether from some inexplicable necessity, from a fortuitous concourse of atoms, from an eternal series of causes and effects, or from one supreme, intelligent, self-existing Being,

* Ovid.

the Author of all things, himself without beginning and without end. To this last Cause the inspired historian has ascribed the formation of this system; and by so doing has established that great principle and foundation of all religion and all morality, and the great source of comfort to every human being, *the existence of one God*, the Creator and Preserver of the world, and the watchful Superintendent of all the creatures that he has made.

The Sacred History next sets before us the primæval happiness of our first parents in Paradise; their fall from this blissful state by the wilful transgression of their Maker's command; the fatal effects of this original violation of duty; the universal wickedness and corruption it gradually introduced among mankind; and the signal and tremendous punishment of that wickedness by the Deluge; the certainty of which is acknowledged by the most ancient writers, and very evident traces of which are to be found at this day in various parts of the globe. It then relates the peopling of the world again by the family of Noah; the covenant entered into by God with that patriarch,

the

the relapse of mankind into wickedness; the calling of Abraham; and the choice of one family and people, the Israelites (or, as they were afterwards called, the Jews) who were separated from the rest of the world to preserve the knowledge and the worship of a Supreme Being, and the great fundamental doctrine of THE UNITY; while all the rest of mankind, even the wisest and most learned, were devoted to polytheism and idolatry, and the grossest and most abominable superstitions. It then gives us the history of this people, with their various migrations, revolutions, and principal transactions. It recounts their removal from the land of Canaan, and their establishment in Ægypt under Joseph; whose history is related in a manner so natural, so interesting and affecting, that it is impossible for any man of common sensibility to read it without the strongest emotions of tenderness and delight.

In the book of Exodus we have the deliverance of this people from their bondage in Ægypt, by a series of the most astonishing miracles; and their travels through the wilderness for forty years under the conduct of

Moses; during which time (besides many other rules and directions for their moral conduct) they received the Ten Commandments, written on two tables of stone by the finger of God himself, and delivered by him to Moses with the most awful and tremendous solemnity; containing a code of moral law infinitely superior to any thing known to the rest of mankind in those rude and barbarous ages.

The books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, are chiefly occupied with the various other laws, institutions, and regulations given to this people, respecting their civil government, their moral conduct, their religious duties, and their ceremonial observances.

Among these, the book of Deuteronomy (which concludes what is called the Pentateuch or five books of Moses) is distinguished above all the rest by a concise and striking recapitulation of the innumerable blessings and mercies which they had received from God since their departure from Horeb; by strong expostulations on their past rebellious conduct, and their shameful ingratitude for all

all these distinguishing marks of the Divine favour; by many forcible and pathetic exhortations to repentance and obedience in future; by promises of the most substantial rewards, if they returned to their duty; and by denunciations of the severest punishments, if they continued disobedient; and all this delivered in a strain of the most animated, sublime, and commanding eloquence.

The historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, continue the history of the Jewish nation under their leaders, judges, and kings, for near a thousand years; and one of the most prominent and instructive parts of this history is the account given of the life and reign of Solomon, his wealth, his power, and all the glories of his reign; more particularly that noble proof he gave of his piety and munificence, by the construction of that truly magnificent temple which bore his name; the solemn and splendid dedication of this temple to the service of God; and that inimitable prayer which he then offered up to Heaven in the presence of the whole Jewish people; a prayer evidently coming from the heart, sublime, simple, ner-

vous, and pathetic; exhibiting the justest and the warmest sentiments of piety, the most exalted conceptions of the Divine nature, and every way equal to the sanctity, the dignity, and the solemnity of the occasion.

Next to these follow the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which contain the history of the Jews for a considerable period of time after their return from a captivity of 70 years in Babylon, about which time the name of Jews seems first to have been applied to them. The books of Ruth and Esther are a kind of appendage to the public records, delineating the characters of two very amiable individuals, distinguished by their virtues, and the very interesting incidents which befel them, the one in private, the other in public life, and which were in some degree connected with the honour and prosperity of the nation to which they belonged.

In the book of Job we have the history of a personage of high rank, of remote antiquity, and extraordinary virtues; rendered remarkable by uncommon vicissitudes of fortune, by the most splendid prosperity at one time, by an accumulation of the heaviest calamities at another;

another; conducting himself under the former with moderation, uprightness, and unbounded kindness to the poor; and under the latter, with the most exemplary patience and resignation to the will of Heaven. The composition is throughout the greater part highly poetical and figurative, and exhibits the noblest representations of the Supreme Being and a superintending Providence, together with the most admirable lessons of fortitude and submission to the will of God under the severest afflictions that can befal human nature. The Psalms, which follow this book, are full of such exalted strains of piety and devotion, such beautiful and animated descriptions of the power, the wisdom, the mercy, the goodness of God, that it is impossible for any one to read them without feeling his heart inflamed with the most ardent affection towards the great Creator and Governor of the universe.

The Proverbs of Solomon, which come next in order, contain a variety of very excellent maxims of wisdom, and invaluable rules of life, which have no where been exceeded except in the New Testament. They afford

afford us, as they profess to do at their very first outset, "the instruction of wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity. They give subtilty to the simple; to the young man, knowledge and discretion."

The same may be said of the greater part of the book of Ecclesiastes, which also teaches us to form a juſt estimate of this world, and its seeming advantages of wealth, honour, power, pleasure, and science.

The prophetical writings present us with the worthiest and most exalted ideas of the Almighty, the justest and purest notions of piety and virtue, the awfullest denunciations against wickedness of every kind, public and private; the most affectionate expostulations, the most inviting promises, and the warmest concern for the public good. And besides all this, they contain a series of predictions relating to our blessed Lord, in which all the remarkable circumſtances of his birth, life, ministry, miracles, doctrines, sufferings, and death, are foretold in so minute and exact a manner (more particularly in the prophecy of Isaiah) that you would almost think they were describing all these

these things after they had happened, if you did not know that these prophecies were confessedly written many hundred years before Christ came into the world, and were all that time in the possession of the Jews, who were the mortal enemies of Christianity, and therefore would never go about to forge prophecies, which most evidently prove him to be what he professed to be, and what they denied him to be, the Messiah and the Son of God. It is to this part of Scripture that our Lord particularly directs our attention, when he says, "search the Scriptures, for they are they that testify of me*." The testimony he alludes to is that of the prophets; than which no evidence can be more satisfactory and convincing to any one that reads them with care and impartiality, and compares their predictions concerning our Saviour with the history of his life, given us by those who constantly lived and conversed with him. This history we have in the New Testament, in that part of it which goes by the name of the GOSPELS.

* John v. 39.

It is these that recount those wonderful and important events with which the Christian religion and the divine Author of it were introduced into the world, and which have produced so great a change in the principles, the manners, the morals, and the temporal as well as the spiritual condition of mankind. They relate the first appearance of Christ upon earth; his extraordinary and miraculous birth; the testimony borne to him by his forerunner John the Baptist; his temptation in the wilderness; the opening of his divine commission; the pure, the perfect, the sublime morality which he taught, especially in his inimitable Sermon from the Mount; the infinite superiority which he showed to every other moral teacher, both in the matter and manner of his discourses: more particularly by crushing vice in its very cradle, in the first risings of wicked desires and propensities in the heart; by giving a decided preference of the mild, gentle, passive, conciliating virtues, to that violent, vindictive, high-spirited, unforgiving temper, which has been always too much the favourite character of the world; by requiring

requiring us to forgive our very enemies, and to do good to them that hate us; by excluding from our devotions, our alms, and all our other virtues, all regard to fame, reputation, and applause; by laying down two great general principles of morality, love to God and love to mankind, and deducing from thence every other human duty; by conveying his instructions under the easy, familiar, and impressive form of parables; by expressing himself in a tone of dignity and authority unknown before; by exemplifying every virtue that he taught in his own unblemished and perfect life and conversation; and above all, by adding those awful sanctions, which he alone, of all moral instructors, had the power to hold out, eternal rewards to the virtuous, and eternal punishments to the wicked. The sacred narrative then represents to us the high character he assumed; the claim he made to a divine original; the wonderful miracles he wrought in proof of his divinity; the various prophecies which plainly marked him out as the Messiah, the great deliverer of the Jews; the declarations he made, that he came to offer himself a sacrifice for the sins of all mankind;

mankind; the cruel indignities, sufferings, and persecutions, to which, in consequence of this great design, he was exposed; the accomplishment of it by the painful and ignominious death to which he submitted; by his resurrection after three days from the grave; by his ascension into heaven; by his sitting there at the right hand of God, and performing the office of a Mediator and an Intercessor for the sinful sons of men, till he comes a second time in his glory to sit in judgment on all mankind, and decide their final doom of happiness or misery for ever.

These are the momentous, the interesting truths, on which the GOSPELS principally dwell.

The ACTS OF THE APOSTLES continue the history of our religion after our Lord's ascension; the astonishing and rapid propagation of it by a few illiterate tent-makers and fishermen, through almost every part of the world, "by demonstration of the Spirit and of power;" without the aid of eloquence or of force, and in opposition to all the authority, all the power, and all the influence of the opulent and the great.

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THE EPISTLES, that is, the letters addressed by the Apostles and their associates to different churches and to particular individuals, contain many admirable rules and directions to the primitive converts; many affecting exhortations, expostulations, and reproofs; many explanations and illustrations of the doctrines delivered by our Lord; together with constant references to facts, circumstances, and events, recorded in the Gospels and the Acts; in which we perceive such striking, yet evidently such unpremeditated and undesigned coincidences and agreements between the narratives and the epistles, as form one most conclusive argument for the truth, authenticity, and genuineness of both*.

The sacred volume concludes with the Revelation of St. John, which, under the form of visions and various symbolical representations, presents to us a prophetic history of the Christian religion in future times, and the various changes, vicissitudes, and revolutions it was to undergo in different ages and countries to the end of the world†.

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* See the Horæ Paulinæ of Dr. Paley.

† A fuller and more detailed account of the contents of

Is it possible now to conceive a nobler, a more comprehensive, a more useful scheme of instruction than this; in which the uniformity and variety, so happily blended together, give it an inexpressible beauty, and the whole composition plainly proves its Author to be divine?

"The Bible is not indeed (as a great writer observes*) a plan of religion delineated with minute accuracy, to instruct men as in something altogether new, or to excite a vain admiration and applause; but it is somewhat unspeakably more great and noble, comprehending (as we have seen) in the grandest and most magnificent order, along with every essential of that plan, the various dispensations of God to mankind, from the formation of this earth to the consummation of all things. *Other* books may afford us much

of the several Books of Scripture may be found in Mr. Gray's *Key to the Old Testament*, Bp. Percy's *to the New*, and the Bishop of Lincoln's late excellent work on the *Elements of Christian Theology*. That part of it which relates to the Scriptures has been lately reprinted, for the accommodation of the public at large, in a duodecimo volume, which I particularly recommend to the attention of my readers.

* Archbishop Secker, V. 6.

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entertainment and much instruction; may gratify our curiosity, may delight our imagination, may improve our understandings, may calm our passions, may exalt our sentiments, may even improve our hearts. But they have not, they cannot have that authority in what they affirm, in what they require, in what they promise and threaten, that the Scriptures have. There is a peculiar weight and energy in *them*, which is not to be found in any other writings. Their denunciations are more awful, their convictions stronger, their consolations more powerful, their counsels more authentic, their warnings more alarming, their expostulations more penetrating. There are passages in them throughout so sublime, so pathetic, full of such energy and force upon the heart and conscience, yet without the least appearance of labour and study for that purpose; indeed the design of the whole is so noble, so well suited to the sad condition of human kind; the morals have in them such purity and dignity; the doctrines, so many of them above reason, yet so perfectly reconcileable with it; the expression is so majestic, yet familiarized with such easy simplicity, that

the more we read and study these writings with pious dispositions and judicious attention, the more we shall see and feel of the hand of God in them*." But that which stamps upon them the highest value, that which renders them, strictly speaking, *inestimable*, and distinguishes them from all other

* That accomplished scholar and distinguished writer, the late Sir William Jones, chief justice of Bengal, at the end of his Bible wrote the following note; which, coming from a man of his profound erudition, and perfect knowledge of the oriental languages, customs, and manners, must be considered as a most powerful testimony, not only to the sublimity, but to the divine inspiration of the Sacred Writings.

"I have (says he) regularly and attentively read these Holy Scriptures, and am of opinion, that this volume, independently of its divine origin, contains more true sublimity, more exquisite beauty, more pure morality, more important history, and finer strains both of poetry and eloquence, than can be collected from all other books, in whatever age or language they may have been composed.

"The two parts, of which the Scriptures consist, are connected by a chain of compositions, which bear no resemblance, in form or style, to any that can be produced from the stores of Grecian, Persian, or even Arabian learning: the antiquity of those compositions no man doubts; and the unstrained application of them to events long subsequent to their publication, is a solid ground of belief that they are genuine predictions, and consequently inspired."

books

books in the world, is this, that they, and they only, "*contain the words of eternal life**." In this respect, every other book, even the noblest compositions of man, must fail us; they cannot give us that which we most want, and what is of infinitely more importance to us than all other things put together, ETERNAL LIFE.

This we must look for no where but in Scripture. It is there, and there only, that we are informed, from authority, of the immortality of the soul, of a general resurrection from the dead, of a future judgment, of a state of eternal happiness to the good, and of eternal misery to the bad. It is there we are made acquainted with the fall of our first parents from a state of innocence and happiness; with the guilt, corruption, and misery, which this sad event brought on all their posterity; which, together with their own personal and voluntary transgressions, rendered them obnoxious to God's severest punishments. But, to our inexpressible comfort, we are further told in this divine book, that God is full of mercy, compassion, and goodness; that he is not extreme to mark what is

* John vi. 68.

done amiss; that he willeth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness, and save his soul alive. In pity therefore to mankind, he was pleased to provide a remedy for their dreadful state. He was pleased to adopt a measure which should at once satisfy his justice, show his extreme abhorrence of sin, make a sufficient atonement for the sins of the whole world, and release all who accepted the terms proposed to them from the punishment they had deserved. This was nothing less than the death of his Son Jesus Christ, whom he sent into the world to take our nature upon him, to teach us a most holy, pure, and benevolent religion, to reform us both by his precepts and example; and lastly, to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification. By him and his evangelists and apostles we are assured, that if we sincerely repent of our sins, and firmly believe in him and his Gospel, we shall for the sake of his sufferings and his righteousness, have all our transgressions forgiven and blotted out, shall be *justified*, that is, considered as innocent in the sight of God, shall have the assistance of his Holy Spirit

Spirit for our future conduct; and if we persevere to the end in a uniform (though, from the infirmity of our nature, imperfect) obedience to all the laws of Christ, shall, through his merits, be rewarded with everlasting glory in the life to come.

Since then the utility, the absolute necessity of reading the Scriptures is so great, since they are not only the best guide you can consult, but the only one that can possibly lead you to heaven; it becomes the indispensable duty of every one of you most carefully and constantly to peruse these sacred oracles, that you may thereby "become perfect, thoroughly furnished to every good work*." They who have much leisure should employ a considerable share of it in this holy exercise, and even they who are most immersed in business have, or ought to have, the Lord's Day entirely to spare, and should always employ some part of it (more particularly at this holy season) in reading and meditating on the word of God. By persevering steadily in this practice, any one may, in no great length of time, read the Scriptures

* 2 Tim. iii. 17.

through, from one end to the other. But in doing this, it will be advisable to begin with the New Testament first, and to read it over most frequently, because it concerns us Christians the most nearly, and explains to us more fully and more clearly the words of eternal life. But after you have once gone regularly through both the Old Testament and the New, it may then be most useful, perhaps, to select out of each such passages as lay before you the great fundamental doctrines, and most essential duties, of your Christian profession; and even amongst these, to dwell the longest on such as express these things in the most awful and striking manner, such as affect and touch you most powerfully, such as make your heart burn within you, and stir up all the pious affections in your soul. But it will be of little use to *read*, unless at the same time also you *reflect*; unless you apply what you read to those great purposes which the Scriptures were meant to promote, the amendment of your faults, the improvement of your hearts, and, the salvation of your souls.

To assist you in this most important and necessary work, is the design of these Lectures;

and in the execution of this design I shall have these four objects principally in view:

First, To explain and illustrate those passages of holy writ, which are in any degree difficult and obscure.

2dly, To point out, as they occur in the sacred writings, the chief leading fundamental principles and doctrines of the Christian religion.

3dly, To confirm and strengthen your faith, by calling your attention to those strong internal marks of the truth and divine authority of the Christian religion, which present themselves to us in almost every page of the Gospel.

4thly, To lay before you the great moral precepts of the Gospel, to press them home upon your consciences and your hearts, and render them effectual to the important ends they were intended to serve; namely, the due government of your passions, the regulation of your conduct, and the attainment of everlasting life.

These are all of them objects of the very last importance; they are worthy the attention of every human being; and they will, I think, be better attained by a familiar and

practical explanation of the sacred writings, than by any other species of composition whatever.

The plan of instruction adopted by our blessed Lord was unquestionably the very best that could be devised. It was not a regular system of ethics, delivered in a connected series of dry essays and dissertations, like those of the ancient heathen philosophers; but it consisted of familiar discourses, interesting parables, short sententious maxims, and occasional reflections, arising from the common occurrences of life, and the most obvious appearances of nature. All these various modes of instruction are so judiciously blended and mixed together in the history of our Lord's life and conversation, delivered to us in the Gospel (as all the various sorts of pleasing objects are in the unornamented scenes of nature) that they make a much deeper impression both on the understanding and on the heart, than they could possibly do in any other more artificial form.

An exposition of Scripture, then, must at all times be highly useful and interesting to every sincere disciple of Christ; but must be peculiarly so at the present moment, when so much

much pains have been taken to ridicule and revile the sacred writings, to subvert the very foundations of our faith, and to poison the minds of all ranks of people, but especially the middling and the lower classes, by the most impious and blasphemous publications that ever disgraced any Christian country *. To resist these wicked attempts is the duty of every minister of the Gospel; and as I have strongly exhorted all those who are under my superintendance, to exert themselves with zeal and with vigour in defence of their insulted religion, I think it incumbent on me to take my share in this important contest, and to show that I wish not to throw burthens on others of which I am not willing to bear my full proportion. As long therefore as my health, and the various duties of an extensive and populous diocese, will permit, and the exigencies of the times require such exertions, I propose to continue annually these Lectures. And I shall think it no unbecoming conclusion of my life, if these labours of my declining

* About this time, and for some years before, *The Age of Reason*, and other pestilent writings of the same nature, were disseminated through almost every district of this country with incredible industry.

years

years should tend in any degree to render the Holy Scriptures more clear and intelligible, more useful and delightful; if they shall confirm the faith, reform the manners, console and revive the hearts of those who hear me; and vindicate the honour of our divine Master from those gross indignities and insults, which have of late been so indecently and impiously thrown on him and his religion.

LECTURE II.

MATTHEW ii.

HAVING in the preceding Lecture taken a short comprehensive view of the several books of the sacred volume, I now proceed to the Gospel of St. Matthew; and shall in this Lecture confine myself to the two first chapters of that book*.

The history of our Saviour's birth, life, doctrines, precepts, and miracles, is contained in four books or narratives called Gospels, written at different times, and by four different persons, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who were among the first converts to Christianity, and perfectly well acquainted with the facts they relate; to which, two of them were

* For some very valuable observations in some parts of this, and the third and thirteenth Lecture, I am indebted to my late excellent friend and patron, Archbishop Secker.

eye-

eye-witnesses, and the other two constant companions of those who were so, from whom they received immediately every thing they relate. This is better authority for the truth of these histories than we have for the greater part of the histories now extant, the fidelity of which we do not in the least question. For few of our best histories, either ancient or modern, were written by persons who were eye-witnesses of all the transactions which they relate; and there is scarce any instance of the history of the same person being written by four different contemporary historians, all perfectly agreeing in the main articles, and differing only in a few minute particulars of no moment. This however we find actually done in the life of Jesus, which has been written by each of the four evangelists, and it is a very strong proof of their veracity. For let us consider what the case is, at this very day, in the affairs of common life. When four different persons are called upon in a court of justice to prove the reality of any particular fact that happened twenty or thirty years ago, what is the sort of evidence which they usually give? Why, in all the great leading circumstances,

stances, which tend to establish the fact in question, they in general perfectly agree. In a few other points perhaps they differ. But then these are points which do not at all affect the main question, which were too trifling to make much impression at the time on the memory of the observers, and which therefore they would all relate with some little variation in their account. This is precisely the case with the writers of the four Gospels; and this substantial coincidence and accidental variation has much more the air and garb of truth, than where there is a perfect agreement in every the minutest article; which has too much the appearance of a concerted story.

That the books which we now have under the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were written by the persons whose names they bear, cannot admit the smallest doubt with any unprejudiced mind. They have been acknowledged as such by every Christian church in every age, from the time of our Saviour to this moment. There are allusions to them, or quotations from them, in the earliest writers, as far back as the age of the apostles, and continued down in a regular succession to the present

present hour; a proof of authenticity, which scarce any other ancient book in the world can produce. They were received as genuine histories, not only by the first Christians, but by the first *enemies* of Christianity, and their authority was never questioned either by the ancient heathens or Jews*.

The first of these Gospels is that of St. Matthew. It was written probably at the latest not more than fifteen years, some think only eight years, after our Lord's ascension. The author of it was an apostle and constant companion of Jesus, and of course an eye-witness of every thing he relates. He was called by our blessed Lord from a most lucrative occupation, that of a collector of the public revenue, to be one of his disciples and friends: a call which he immediately obeyed, relinquishing every thing that was dear and valuable to him in the present life. This is a sacrifice which few people have made for the

* Whoever wishes for further satisfaction on this most important subject, will not fail of finding it in Dr. Lardner's learned work, *The Credibility of the Gospel History*, where this question has been very ably treated, and the authenticity of the Gospels established on the most solid grounds.

sake of religion, and had St. Matthew's object been the applause of men, he might have displayed the merits of this sacrifice in a light very favourable to himself. But the apostle, conscious of much nobler views, describes this transaction in the simplest and most artless words. "As Jesus," says he, "passed forth from thence, he saw a man named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom, and he saith unto him, Follow me: and he arose, and followed him."

The first thing that occurs in the Gospel of St. Matthew, is the genealogy of Christ, in order to prove that he was descended from the house and family of David, as the prophets foretold he should be.

In this genealogy there are confessedly some difficulties, at which we cannot be much surprised, when we consider of what prodigious antiquity this genealogy is, going back some thousands of years; and when we know too that several Jewish persons had the same name, and that the same person had different names, (especially under the Babylonish captivity,) which is still the case in India, and other parts of Asia. This must necessarily

create

create some perplexity, especially at such a distance as we are from the first sources of information. But to the Jews themselves at the time, there were probably no difficulties at all; and it does not appear that they (who were certainly the best judges of the question) made any objection to this genealogy of Christ, or denied him to be descended from the family of David. We may therefore reasonably conclude, that his descent was originally admitted to be fairly made out by the evangelists, whatever obscurities may have arisen since. Indeed it is highly probable, that this genealogy was taken from some public records or registers of the ancient Jewish families, which it is very evident from Josephus that the Jews had, especially with regard to the lineage of David, and which were universally known and acknowledged to be authentic documents. I shall therefore only observe further on this head, that St. Matthew gives the pedigree of Joseph, and St. Luke that of Mary. But they both come to the same thing, because among the Jews the pedigree of the husband was considered as the *legal* pedigree of the wife; and as Mary and Joseph were nearly

nearly related, and were of the same tribe and family, their genealogies of course must run nearly in the same line.

After the genealogy of Christ, follows an account of his birth, which, as we may easily suppose of so extraordinary a person, had something in it very extraordinary. Accordingly the evangelist tells us, "that the angel of the Lord appeared unto Joseph in a dream, saying, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost: and she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus (that is, a Saviour); for he shall save his people from their sins *."

This undoubtedly was a most wonderful and singular and unexampled event. But it was natural to imagine, that when the Son of God was to appear upon the scene, he would enter upon it in a way somewhat different from the sons of men. And in fact we find him appearing upon earth in a manner perfectly new, and peculiar to himself; in a manner, which united

* Matt. i. 20.

in itself at once the evidence of prophecy and of miracle. He was born of a virgin, and, what is no less wonderful, it was predicted of him seven hundred years before, that he should be so born. "Behold," says Isaiah, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel*;" a Hebrew word, signifying *God with us.* What man, but a prophet, inspired of God, could have foreseen an event so completely improbable, and apparently impossible? What impostor would have hazarded such a prediction as this? and, what is still of more importance, what impostor could have fulfilled it? What less than the power of God could have enabled Jesus to fulfil it? By that power he *did* fulfil it. He only, of the whole human race, did fulfil it, and thus proved himself to be at the very moment of his birth, what the whole course of his future life, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension into heaven, further declared him to be, THE SON OF GOD.

And as such he was soon acknowledged, and due homage paid to his divinity by a very singular embassy, and in a very singular

* Isaiah, vii. 14.

manner.

manner. For the evangelist proceeds to tell us in the beginning of the second chapter, that "when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." As this is a very remarkable, and very important event, I shall employ the remaining part of this lecture in explaining it to you at large, subjoining such reflections as naturally arise from it.

The name of these persons, whom our translation calls *wise men*, is in the original μαγοι, in the Latin language, *magi*, from whence is derived our English word, magicians. The magi were a sect of ancient philosophers, living in the eastern part of the world, collected together in colleges, addicted to the study of astronomy, and other parts of natural philosophy, and highly esteemed throughout the east, having juster sentiments of God and his worship than any of the ancient heathens; for they abhorred the adoration of images made in the form of men and animals, and though

they *did* represent the Deity under the symbol of fire (the purest and most active of all material substances) yet they worshipped *one only God:* and so blameless did their studies and their religion appear to be, that the prophet Daniel, scrupulous as he was, to the hazard of his life, with respect to the Jewish religion, did not refuse to accept the office which Nebuchadnezzar gave him, of being master of the magi, and chief governor over all the wise men of Babylon*. They were therefore evidently the fittest of all the ancient heathens to have the first knowledge of the Son of God, and of salvation by him imparted to them.

The country from whence they came is only described in St. Matthew as lying east from Judea, and therefore might be either Persia, where the principal residence of the magi was, or else Arabia, to which ancient authors say they did, and undoubtedly they easily might, extend themselves; which it is well known abounded in the valuable things that their presents consisted of; and concerning which the seventy-second Psalm (plainly

* Vid. Dan. v. 11.

speaking

speaking of the Messiah) says, "The kings of Arabia and Saba, or Sabæa (an adjoining region) shall bring gifts;" and again, "unto him shall be given of the gold of Arabia."

Supposing this prophecy of the Psalmist to point out the persons whose journey the evangelist relates, it will also determine what their station or rank in life was, namely, *kings*, "the kings of Arabia and Saba." Of this circumstance St. Matthew says nothing directly, but their offerings are a sufficient evidence that their condition could not be a mean one: and though there is certainly no proof, there is on the other hand no improbability, of their being lords of small sovereignties, which might afford them a claim, according to the ancient usage of that part of the world, to the name of kings. For we read in Scripture not only of some small* towns or tracts that had each of them their king, but of some also, which could not be very large, that had each of them several †.

What number of the wise men or magi came to our Lord, is entirely unknown, and

* Josh. x. 5. † Jerem. xxv, 20—26.

perhaps that of three was imagined for no other reason, than because the gifts which they brought were of three sorts. The occasion of their coming is expressed by St. Matthew in their own words; "Where is He that is born king of the Jews? for we are come to worship him."

That a very extraordinary person was to appear under this character about that time, was a very general persuasion throughout the east; as not only Jewish but heathen writers tell us, in conformity with the New Testament. And that this person was to have dominion over the whole earth, was part of that persuasion, founded on predictions of the clearest import. I need produce but one, from the above-mentioned 72d Psalm, which, as I before observed, plainly relates to Christ, "All kings shall fall down before him; all nations shall do him service." There were Jews enough even in Persia, and much more in Arabia, to propagate this doctrine, and shew it to be contained in their sacred books; from whence therefore the wise men may well be supposed to have received it.

But

But their knowledge that he was actually born, must stand on some other foundation; and what that was, themselves declare, "We have seen his star in the east*." This must plainly mean some new appearance in the sky which they, whose profession (as is well known) led them peculiarly to the study of astronomy, had observed in the heavens. Now any appearance of a body of light in the air is called by the Greek and Latin authors a *star*, though it be only a *meteor*, that is, a transient accidental luminous vapour, neither of considerable height, nor long continuance; in which sense also the Scripture speaks of *stars falling from heaven*†. And such was that which, the wise men saw, as will appear from a circumstance to be mentioned hereafter. Possibly indeed the first light which surprized them might be that mentioned by St. Luke, when the *glory of the Lord* descending from heaven, shone round about the shepherds, and his angel came upon them, to bring them the news of our Saviour's nativity‡. For that

* Matth. ii. 2.
† Matt. xxiv. 29. Mark, xiii. 25.
‡ Luke, ii. 9.

glory, seen at a distance, might have the appearance of a star; and their seeing the star in *the east*, is not to be understood as if they saw it to the eastward of themselves; but means, that they being eastward of Judea, saw the star, seeming probably to hang over that country.

Now such an uncommon sight alone, supposing their expectation of him raised (as there was then a general expectation of him) might naturally incline them to think he was come; and especially as it was a current opinion amongst persons professing skill in these matters, that the shining forth of a new star denoted the rise of a new kingdom, or of a great and extraordinary prince; whence, as Pliny relates*, Augustus the Roman emperor said, that the comet which appeared on Cæsar's death, whom he succeeded, was born for him, and that he was born in that comet; for so it seems he expressed himself.

This, I say, being a current opinion, the wise men would be apt enough to conclude, that the present star betokened the birth of

* Vid. Plin. Nat. Hist. L. ii. Ch. 25.

that

that prince, of whom (as they might easily have heard) it had been so very long foretold, "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel*." And it is a very remarkable circumstance, that one of the ancient commentators on the Timæus of Plato†, alluding to this very star, expresses himself in these words: "There is a still more venerable and sacred tradition, which relates, that by the rising of a certain uncommon star, was foretold, not diseases or deaths, but the descent of an adorable God for the salvation of the human race, and the melioration of human affairs; which star, they say, was observed by the Chaldæans, who came to present their offerings to the new-born God‡."

On their arrival at Jerusalem, and making the inquiry they came for, Herod we find was *troubled*, and all Jerusalem with him. That so jealous a tyrant as Herod should be *troubled* at this event is no wonder; and it is no less natural that the people also should

* Num. xxiv. 17.

† Chalcidius.

‡ See Brucker's History of Philosophy, v. iii. p. 472.

be

be disturbed and alarmed, not knowing what the consequences of so extraordinary a birth might be. Herod, therefore, calls the chief priests and scribes together, and demands of them, whether it were known where THE CHRIST should be born; and having learnt from them, that, according to the prophet Micah, Bethlehem was the place appointed by Heaven, sends the wise men thither with a request that they would inform him when they had found the child, that he also might go and pay him due homage, intending all the while to destroy him, when he had obtained the requisite intelligence. Accordingly the wise men proceeded on their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem; when the same luminous appearance, which they had observed in their own country, now attended them again, to their very great joy, and conducted them at length to the very house where the child was; which probably (as is common in villages) had no other house contiguous to it, and therefore might be easily marked by the situation of the meteor.

When the wise men came into the house and saw the child, they fell down and worshipped

shipped him, that is, bowed and prostrated themselves before him, in the eastern manner of doing obeisance to kings. Whether they designed also paying him religious adoration, or how distinct a knowledge had been given them of the nature and rank of the Saviour of the world, we cannot say; but may be sure, that what they believed and what they did was at that time sufficient to procure them acceptance with God. Indeed, according to the opinion of some ancient fathers concerning their presents, their faith must have been very great. For they represent the incense, as offered to our Saviour as God; the gold to have been paid as tribute to a king; and the myrrh (a principal ingredient used in embalming) brought as an acknowledgment that he was to die for men. But others interpret the same gifts very differently, and take them to signify the three spiritual offerings, which we must all present to Heaven, through Jesus Christ; the incense to denote piety towards God; the gold, charity towards our fellow-creatures; and the myrrh, purity of soul and body; it being highly efficacious in preserving them from corruption. But though either

or both these notions may be piously and innocently entertained, yet all we know with certainty is, that in those parts of the world no one did then or does now appear before a prince, without a suitable present, usually of the most valuable commodities of his country; and that three of the principal productions of the east, particularly of Arabia, were gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

How the wise men were affected with the sight of so unspeakably important a person, in such mean circumstances; or Joseph and Mary, and all that must flock around them, with so humble an address from strangers of such high dignity; and what further passed in consequence of this on either side, every one may in some degree imagine; but no one can undertake to relate, since the Gospels do not. We are there only told, that these respectable visitors, having paid their duty in this manner, and being warned of God not to return to Herod*, "departed into their own country another way."

Thus ends this remarkable piece of history, in which all the circumstances are so perfectly

* Matth. ii. 12.

conformable

conformable to the manners, the customs, the prevailing opinions and notions of those times, in which the narrative is supposed to have been written, that they tend greatly to confirm the truth and credibility of the sacred history. I have already in going along touched slightly on some of these circumstances, but it may be useful here to draw them all into one point of view.

1. In the first place, then, the journey of these wise men, and the object of it, namely, to find out him who was born king of the Jews, corresponds exactly to the information given by several heathen authors*, that there was in those days a general expectation of some very extraordinary personage, who was to make his appearance at that particular period of time, and in that particular part of the world.

2. If the birth of this extraordinary personage was marked by a new star or meteor in the heavens, it was very natural that it should first strike the observation of those called the *wise men*, who lived in a country where the

* Vid. Tacit. Hist. v. 13. Sueton. in Vita Vesp. c. 4.

stars

stars and the planets shone with uncommon lustre, where the science of astronomy was (for that reason perhaps) particularly cultivated, where it was the peculiar profession of these very magi, or wise men, and where no remarkable appearance in the heavens could escape the many curious eyes that were constantly fixed upon them.

3. The *manner* in which these wise men approached our Lord, is precisely that in which the people always addressed themselves to men of high rank and dignity.

They *worshipped* him; that is, they prostrated themselves to the ground before him; which we know was then and still is the custom of those countries.

They *offered presents* to him: and it is well known, that without a present no great man was at that time or is now approached.

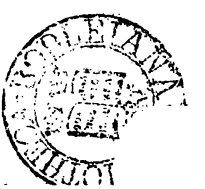
These presents were gold, frankincense, and myrrh; and these, as we have before observed, were the natural productions of that country whence the wise men are supposed to have come, namely, Arabia or Sabæa.

Even that dreadful transaction, which was the unfortunate consequence of their journey,

the murder of the Innocents, exactly corresponds with the character of Herod, who was one of the most cruel and ferocious tyrants that ever disgraced a throne, and amongst other horrible barbarities had put to death a son of his own. No wonder, then, that his jealousy should prompt him to murder a number of infants not at all related to him.

All these circumstances concur to prove that the sacred historians lived in the times and the countries in which they are supposed to have written the Gospels, and were perfectly well acquainted with every thing they relate. Had not this been the case, they must have been detected in an error, in some of the many incidents they touched upon; which yet has never happened.

4. It is also, in the last place, worthy of remark, that every thing is here related with the greatest plainness, brevity, and simplicity, without any of that ostentation and parade which we so often meet with in other authors. Thus, for instance, a heathen writer would have put a long and eloquent speech into the mouth of the wise men, and would have provided the parents of the infant with a suitable



able answer. He would have painted the massacre of the infants in the most dreadful colours, and would have drawn a most affecting picture of the distress and agony of their afflicted parents. But the Evangelists have not enlarged on these, or any other similar topics. They have contented themselves with telling their story concisely and coldly, with a bare simple recital of the facts, without attempting to work upon the passions, or excite the admiration of their readers.

In fact, it appears from this and a variety of other instances of the same nature, that neither fame nor reputation, nor any other worldly advantage, had the least influence upon their hearts. Their sole object was the advancement of truth, of morality, of religion, of the eternal welfare and salvation of mankind. For these great objects they wrote, for these they lived, for these they suffered, and for these they died; on these, their thoughts were entirely and immoveably fixed, and therefore their narratives justly claim the most implicit belief in every thing that relates to these great and important and interesting subjects.

Another

Another observation which this part of the Sacred History suggests to us, is this; that no person ever yet appeared in the world, to whom such distinguished marks of honour were paid from his birth to his death, as our blessed Lord. We are often reproached with the mean condition of our Redeemer. We are often told, that He, whom we have chosen for our Lord and Master, who is the object of our adoration, and on whom all our hopes are fixed, was the reputed son of a carpenter, lived in penury and distress, and at last suffered the ignominious death of the cross. All this is true. But it is equally true, that this man of indigence and of sorrow appeared through his whole life to be the peculiar favourite of Heaven; and to have been considered, not indeed by his infatuated countrymen, but by beings of a far superior order, the most important personage that ever appeared on this earthly scene. At his birth, we are told, that the glory of the Lord shone round about certain shepherds that were then keeping watch over their flocks by night; and there was a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in

the highest, and on earth peace, good-will towards men*."

Not long after this, a new star or meteor appeared in the heavens on purpose to announce his birth, which accordingly (as we have just seen) attracted the notice of those illustrious strangers, who came from a distant country to pay their homage to the infant Jesus; whom, notwithstanding the humility of his condition and of his habitation, they hailed as king of the Jews. At his baptism, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him†. After his temptation, when he had vanquished the prince of darkness, behold, angels came and ministered unto him‡. At his transfiguration, his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was bright as the light, and there appeared Moses and Elias talking with him, and from the cloud which overshadowed them, there came a voice, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; *hear ye him*§." At his agony in the garden, there appeared an angel

* Luke, ii. 14. † Matth. iii. 16.
‡ Matth. iv. 11. § Matth. xvii. 5.

unto

unto him, strengthening him*. At his crucifixion, all nature seemed to be thrown into convulsions: the sun was darkened; the veil of the temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom; the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; the graves were opened, and gave up their dead; and even the heathen centurion, and those that were with him, were compelled to cry out, "Truly this was the son of God†." Before his ascension, he said to his disciples, "All power is given to me in heaven and in earth; and while he yet blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven, and a cloud received him out of their sight‡." There, we are told, he sitteth at the right hand of God, making intercession for the sinful race of man, till he comes a second time in the glory of his Father, with all his holy angels, to judge the world. There has God "highly exalted him above all principalities and power, and might and dominion, and given him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under

* Luke, xxii. 43. † Matth. xxvii. 54.
‡ Matth. xxviii. 18. Luke, xxiv. 51.

the earth; and that every tongue should confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father *."

When all these circumstances are taken together, what a magnificent idea do they present to us of the humble Jesus, and how does all earthly splendour fade and die away under this overbearing effulgence of celestial glory! We need not then be ashamed either of the birth, the life, or the death of Christ, "for they are the power of God unto salvation." And if the great and the wise men, whose history we have been considering, were induced, by the appearance of a new star, to search out, with so small labour and fatigue, the infant Saviour of the world; if they, though philosophers and deists (far different from the philosophers and deists of the present day) disdained not to prostrate themselves before him, and present to him the richest and the choicest gifts they had to offer; well may we, when this child of the Most High is not only grown to maturity, but has lived, and died, and risen again for us, and is now set down at the right hand of God (angels and

* Philip. ii. 9—11.

principalities

principalities and powers being made subject to him), well may we not only pay our homage, but our adoration to the Son of God, and offer to him oblations far more precious than gold, frankincense, and myrrh; namely, ourselves, our souls and our bodies, "as a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto him;" well may we join with that innumerable multitude in heaven, which is continually praising him, and saying; "Blessing, and honour, and glory be unto him, that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever*."

* Rev. v, 13.

LECTURE III.

MATTH. CHAP. iii.

THE subject of this Lecture will be the third chapter of St. Matthew, in which we have the history of a very extraordinary person called JOHN THE BAPTIST; to distinguish him from another John mentioned in the New Testament, who was our Saviour's beloved disciple, and the author of the Gospel that bears his name; whence he is called JOHN THE EVANGELIST.

As the character of John the Baptist is in many respects a very remarkable one, and his appearance bears a strong testimony to the divine mission of Christ and the truth of his religion, I shall enter pretty much at large into the particulars of his history, as they are to be found not only in the Gospel of St. Matthew, but in the other three Evangelists; collecting from each all the material circumstances of his

life, from the time of his first appearance in the wilderness to his murder by Herod.

St. Matthew's account of him is as follows: *In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, *repent ye*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins, and his meat was locusts and wild honey. And there went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the regions round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins."

Here then we have a person, who appears to have been sent into the world, on purpose to be the precursor of our Lord, to prepare the way for him and his religion, here called the *kingdom of heaven*, and, as the prophet expresses it, to *make his paths straight*. This is a plain allusion to the custom that prevailed in eastern countries, of sending messengers and pioneers to make the ways level and straight

* Matth. iii. 1—6.

before kings and princes and other great men, when they passed through the country with large retinues, and with great pomp and magnificence. They literally lowered mountains, they raised valleys, they cut down woods, they removed all obstacles, they cleared away all roughnesses and inequalities, and made every thing smooth and plain and commodious for the great personage whom they preceded.

In the same manner was John the Baptist in a spiritual sense *to go before the Lord*, before the Saviour of the world, to prepare his way, to make his paths straight, to remove out of the minds of men every thing that opposed itself to the admission of divine truth, all prejudice, blindness, pride, obstinacy, self-conceit, vanity, and vain philosophy; but above all, to subdue and regulate those depraved affections, appetites, passions, and inveterate habits of wickedness, which are the grand obstacles to conversion and the reception of the word of God.

His exhortation therefore was, "*Repent ye;*" renounce those vices and abominations which at present blind your eyes and cloud your understandings, and then you will be able

to

to see the truth and bear the light. This was the method which John took, the instrument he made use of to extirpate out of the minds of his hearers all impediments to the march of the Gospel, or, as the prophetic language most sublimely expresses it, "He * cried aloud to them, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight the highway for our God. Let every valley be exalted, and every mountain and hill be made low; let the crooked be made straight, and the rough places plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it."

What a magnificent preparation is this for the great Founder of our religion! What an exalted idea must it give us of his dignity and importance, to have a forerunner and a harbinger such as John to proclaim his approach to the world, and call upon all mankind to attend to him! It was a distinction peculiar and appropriate to him. Neither Moses nor any of the prophets can boast this mark of honour. It was reserved for the Son of God, the Messiah, the Redeemer of mankind, and

* Isaiah, xl. 3—5.

was

was well suited to the transcendent dignity of his person, and the grandeur of his design.

The place which St. John chose for the exercise of his ministry was the wilderness of Judea, where he seems to have lived constantly from his birth to the time of his preaching; for St. Luke informs us,* "that he was in the wilderness till the time of his shewing unto Israel." Here it appears he lived with great austerity. For he drank neither wine nor strong drink; a rule frequently observed by the Jews, when they devoted themselves to the stricter exercises of religion. And his meat was locusts and wild honey: such simple food as the desert afforded to the lowest of its inhabitants. For eating some sorts of locusts was not only permitted by the law of Moses, but, as travellers inform us, is common in the east to this day. The clothing of the Baptist was no less simple than his diet. His raiment, we are told, was of camel's hair with a leathern girdle about his loins; the same coarse habit which the meaner people usually wore, and which sometimes even the rich assumed as a garb of mourning. For this raiment of *camel's hair* was

* Luke, i. 80.

nothing

nothing else than that *sackcloth* which we so often read of in Scripture. And as almost every thing of moment was, in those nations and those times, expressed by visible signs as well as by words, the prophets also were generally cloathed in this dress, because one principal branch of their office was to call upon men to *mourn* for their sins. And particularly Elias or Elijah is described in the second book of Kings as a *hairy man**, that is, a man cloathed in hair cloth, or sackcloth (as John was) with a leathern girdle about his loins. Even in outward *appearance* therefore John was another Elias; but much more so as he was endued, according to the angel's prediction, with the *spirit* and *power* of Elias †. Both rose up among the Jews in times of universal corruption; both were authorized to denounce speedy vengeance from Heaven, unless they repented; both executed their commission with the same intrepid zeal; both were persecuted for it: yet nothing deterred either Elias from accusing Ahab to his face, or John from rebuking Herod in the same undaunted manner.

* 2 Kings, i. 8. † Luke, i. 17.

But

But here an apparent difficulty occurs, and the sacred writers are charged with making our Lord and St. John flatly contradict each other.

When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John who he was, and particularly whether he was *Elias*; his answer was, *I am not**: But yet our Lord told the Jews that John *was* the Elias which was to come†. How is this contradiction to be reconciled? Without any kind of difficulty. The Jews had an expectation founded on a literal interpretation of the prophet Malachi‡, that before the Messiah came, that very same Elias or Elijah, who lived and prophesied in the time of Ahab, would rise from the dead and appear again upon earth. John therefore might very truly say that he was not *that* Elias. But yet as we have seen that he resembled Elias in many striking particulars; as the angel told Zacharias that he should come in the *spirit* and *power* of Elias; and as he actually approved himself, in the turn and manner of his life, in his doctrine and his conduct, the very same man to the latter Jews which the other

* John, i. 21. † Matth. xi. 14.
‡ Malachi, iv. 5.

had

had been to the former, our Saviour might with equal truth assure his disciples that John *was* that Elias, whose coming the prophet Malachi had in a *figurative* sense foretold. This difficulty we see is so easily removed, that I should not have thought it worth noticing in this place, had it not been very lately revived with much parade in one of those coarse and blasphemous publications which have been dispersed in this country with so much activity, in order to disseminate vulgar infidelity among the lower orders of people, but which are now sinking fast into oblivion and contempt. This is one specimen of what they call their *arguments* against Christianity, and from this specimen you will judge of all the rest. But to return.

The abstemiousness and rigour of the Baptist's life was calculated to produce very important effects. It was fitted to excite great attention and reverence in the minds of his hearers. It was well suited to the doctrine he was to preach, that of *repentance and contrition*; to the seriousness he wished to inspire, and to the terror which he was appointed to impress on impenitent offenders.

And

And perhaps it was further designed to intimate the need there often is of harsh restraints in the *beginning* of virtue, as the easy familiarity of our Lord's manner and behaviour exhibits the delightful freedom which attends the *perfection* of it. At least, placing these two characters in view of the world, so near to each other, must teach men this very instructive lesson; that though severity of conduct may in various cases be both prudent and necessary, yet the mildest and cheerfullest goodness is the completest: and they the most useful to religion, who are able to converse among sinners without risquing their innocence, as discreet physicians do among the sick without endangering their health.

It is remarkable however that whatever mortifications John practised himself, it does not appear that he prescribed any thing to others beyond the ordinary duties of a good life. His disciples indeed fasted often, and so did many of the Jews besides; probably therefore the former as well as the latter by their own choice. His general injunction was only,* "bring forth fruits meet for repentance."

* Matth. iii. 8.

When

When more particular directions were desired, he commanded all sorts of men to avoid more especially the sins, to which their condition most exposed them. Thus when the* people asked him (the common people of that hard-hearted nation) what shall we do?—John answered, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise." That is, let every one of you according to his abilities exercise those duties of charity and kindness to his neighbour, which you are all of you but too apt to neglect. The publicans or farmers of the revenue came to him, and said, "†Master, what shall we do?" And he said, Exact no more than that which is appointed you." Keep clear from that rapine and extortion of which you are so often guilty in the collection of the revenue. The ‡soldiers too demanded of him, "What shall we do?" his answer was, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely, and be content with your wages." That is, abstain from those acts of injustice, violence, and oppression, to which your profes-

* Luke, iii. 10, 11. † Ibid. 12. 13.
‡ Ibid. iii. 14.

sion

sion too often leads you. Lewd and debauched people also applied to him, to whom no doubt he gave advice suited to their case. And therefore what he taught was, not ceremonial observances, but moral conduct on religious principle; and without this he pronounced (however disgusting the doctrine must be to a proud and superstitious people) the highest outward privileges to be of no value at all. "*Think not," said he to the Jews, "to say within yourselves, 'We have Abraham to our father, and are therefore sure of God's favour, be our conduct what it may:' for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham;" is able to make the most stupid and ignorant of these heathens, whom you so utterly despise, converts to true religion, and heirs of the promises.

Such were the doctrines which John preached to his disciples, and the success which attended him was equal to their magnitude and importance.

This was plainly foretold by the angel that announced his birth to his father Zacharias. "† Many of the children of Israel (said he)

* Matth. iii. 9. † Luke, i. 16.

shall

shall he turn to the Lord their God. Which in fact he did. For the evangelists tell us that "there went out unto him into the wilderness, Jerusalem, and all Judæa, and all the region about Jordan, and were baptized of him*." The truth of this is amply confirmed by Josephus, who informs us, that multitudes flocked to him; for they were greatly delighted with his discourses†.

It might naturally be expected that such extraordinary popularity and applause as this would fill him with conceit and vanity, and inspire him with a most exalted opinion of his own abilities, and a sovereign contempt for any rival teacher of religion. But so far from this, the most prominent feature of his character was an unexampled modesty and humility. Though he had been styled by Malachi the messenger of the Lord, and even Elias (the chief prophet of the Jews next to Moses) he never assumed any higher title than that very humble one given him by Isaiah; *the voice of one crying in the wilderness.* Far from desiring or attempting to fix the admiration of the multitude

* Matth. iii. 5, 6.

† Joseph. Antiq. Jud. xviii. 2. Edit. Huds.

on his own person, he gave notice from his first appearance of *another* immediately to follow him, for whom he was unworthy to perform the most servile offices. He made a scruple, till expressly commanded, of baptizing one so infinitely purer than himself, as he knew the holy Jesus to be. And when his disciples complained that all men deserted him to follow Christ (a most mortifying circumstance, had worldly applause, or interest, or power, been his point) nothing could be more ingenuously self-denying than his answer; "Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said I am *not* the Christ, but am sent before him. He that hath the bride, is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly. This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease: he that is of the earth is earthy: he that cometh from heaven is above all*."

Of such unaffected and disinterested humility as this, where shall we find, except in Christ, another instance? Yet with this was by no means united what we are too apt to associate with our idea of humility, *meanness and*

* John iii. 28, 29, 31.

timidity

timidity of spirit; on the contrary, the whole conduct of the Baptist was marked throughout with the most intrepid courage and magnanimity in the discharge of his duty.

Instead of paying any court either to the great men of his nation on the one hand, or to the multitude on the other, he reproved the former for their hypocrisy in the strongest terms; "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come*?" and he required the latter to renounce every one of those favourite sins which they had long indulged, and were most unwilling to part with. But what is still more, he reproved without fear and without reserve the abandoned and ferocious Herod, for injuriously taking away Herodias his brother's wife, and afterwards incestuously marrying her, and for all the other evil that he had done. He well knew the savage and unrelenting temper of that sanguinary tyrant; he knew that this boldness of expostulation would sooner or later bring down upon him the whole weight of his resentment. But knowing also that he was sent into the world to preach repentance to all, and feeling

* Matth. iii. 7.

it his duty to cry aloud and spare not, to spare not even the greatest and most exalted of sinners, he determined not to shrink from that duty, but to obey his conscience, and take the consequences.

Those consequences were exactly what he must have foreseen. He was first shut up in prison; and not long afterwards, as you all know, the life of this great and innocent man was wantonly sacrificed in the midst of conviviality and mirth to the rash oath of a worthless and a merciless prince, to the licentious fascinations of a young woman, and the implacable vengeance of an old one.

After this short history of the doctrines, the life, and the death of this extraordinary man, I beg leave to offer in conclusion a few remarks upon it to your serious consideration.

And in the first place, in the testimony of John the Baptist, we have an additional and powerful evidence to the truth and the divine authority of Christ and his religion.

If the account given of John in the Gospels be true, the history given there of Jesus must be equally so, for they are plainly parts of one and the same plan, and are so connected and

interwoven with each other, that they must either stand or fall together.

Now that in the first place there did really exist such a person as John the Baptist at the time specified by the evangelists, there cannot be the smallest doubt; for he is mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus, and all the circumstances he relates of him, as far as they go, perfectly correspond with the description given of him by the sacred historians. He represents him as using the ceremony of baptism. He says that multitudes flocked to him, for they were greatly delighted with his discourses, and ready to observe all his directions. He asserts that he was a good man; and that he exhorted the Jews not to come to his baptism without first preparing themselves for it by the practice of virtue; that is, in the language of the Gospels, without repentance. He relates his being inhumanly murdered by Herod; and adds, that the Jews in general entertained so high an opinion of the innocence, virtue, and sanctity of John, as to be persuaded that the destruction of Herod's army, which happened not long after, was a

divine judgment inflicted on him for his barbarity to so excellent a man*.

It appears then that St. John was a person, of whose virtue, integrity, and piety, we have the most ample testimony from an historian of unquestionable veracity, and we may therefore rely with perfect confidence on every thing he tells us. He was the very man foretold both by Isaiah and Malachi, as the forerunner of that divine personage, whom the Jews expected under the name of the Messiah. He declared that Jesus Christ was this divine person, and that he himself was sent into the world on purpose to prepare the way before him by exhorting men to repentance and reformation of life. If then this *record* of John (as the evangelists call it) be true, the divine mission of Christ is at once established, because the Baptist expressly asserts that he was the Son of God, and that whoever believed in him should have everlasting life†. Now that this record is true, we have every reason in the world to believe, not only because a man so eminently distinguished for

* Joseph. Antiq. l. xviii. c. 6. s. 2. Ed. Huds.

† John iii. 36; i. 34.

every

every moral virtue as St. John confessedly was, cannot be thought capable of publicly proclaiming a deliberate falsehood; but because had his character been of a totally different complexion, had he for instance been influenced only by views of interest, ambition, vanity, popularity, this very falsehood must have completely counteracted and overset every project of this nature. For every thing he said of Jesus, instead of aggrandizing and exalting *himself*, tended to lower and to debase him in the eyes of all the world; he assured the multitude who followed him, that there was another person much more worthy to be followed; that there was one coming after him of far greater dignity and consequence than himself; one whose shoes latchet he was not worthy to unloose*; one so infinitely superior to him in rank, authority, and wisdom, that he was not fit to perform for him even the most servile offices. He himself was only come as a humble messenger to announce the arrival of his Lord, and smooth the way before him. But the great personage to whom they were to direct their eyes, and in whom

* Mark i. 7. Luke iii. 16.

they were to center all their hopes, was JESUS CHRIST. Is this now the language of a man who sought only for honour, emolument, or fame, or was actuated only by the fond ambition of being at the head of a sect? No one can think so. It is not very usual surely for men of *any* character, much less for men of the *best* character, to invent and to utter a string of falsehoods with the professed design of degrading themselves and exalting some other person. Yet this was the plain tendency and avowed object of John's declarations, and the effect was exactly what might be expected, and what he wished and intended, namely, that great numbers deserted him and followed Christ*.

But besides bearing this honest and disinterested testimony to Christ, the Baptist hazarded a measure which no impostor or enthusiast ever ventured upon, without being immediately detected and exposed. He ventured to deliver *two prophecies* concerning Christ; prophecies too which were to be completed, not at some distant period, when both he and his hearers might be in their

* John iii. 26; 30; iv. 1.

graves,

graves, and the prophecy itself forgot, but within a very short space of time, when every one who heard the prediction might be a witness to its accomplishment or its failure. He foretold, that *Jesus should baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire*, and that *he should be offered up as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind.** These were very singular things for a man to foretel at hazard and from conjecture, because nothing could be more remote from the ideas of a Jew, or more unlikely to happen in the common course of things. They were moreover of that peculiar nature, that it was utterly impossible for John and Jesus to concert the matter between themselves; for the completion of the prophecies did not depend solely on *them*, but required the concurrence of other agents, of the Holy Ghost in the first instance, and of the Jews and the Roman governor in the other; and unless these had entered into a confederacy with the Baptist and with Christ, to fulfil what John foretold, it was not in the power of either to secure the completion of it. Yet both these

* Matth. iii. 11. John i. 29.

prophecies

prophecies were, we know, actually accomplished within a very few years after they were delivered; for our Lord suffered death upon the cross for the redemption of the world; and the Holy Ghost descended visibly upon the apostles in the semblance of fire on the day of Pentecost*.

It is evident then that the Baptist was not only a good man, but a true prophet; and for both reasons, his testimony in favour of Christ, that he was the Son of God, affords an incontestable proof that both he and his religion came from heaven.

2. The history of the Baptist affords a proof also of another point of no small importance. It gives a strong confirmation to that great evangelical doctrine, the doctrine of atonement; the expiation of our sins by the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross.

We are often told, that there was no need for this expiation. That repentance and reformation are fully sufficient to restore the most abandoned sinners to the favour of a just and merciful God, and to avert the punishment due to their offences.

* Acts ii. 2.

But

But what does the great herald and forerunner of Christ say to this? He came professedly as *a preacher of repentance*. This was his peculiar office, the great object of his mission, the constant topic of his exhortations. "Repent ye, and bring forth fruits meet for repentance*." This was the unceasing language of "the voice crying in the wilderness."

If then repentance alone had sufficient efficacy for the expiation of sin, surely we should have heard of this from him who came on purpose to preach repentance. But what is the case? Does he tell us that repentance *alone* will take away the guilt of our transgressions, and justify us in the eyes of our Maker? Quite the contrary. Notwithstanding the great stress he justly lays on the indispensable necessity of repentance, yet he tells his followers at the same time, that it was to *Christ only*, and to his death, that they were to look for the pardon of their sins. "Behold," says he, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world†!" And again "he that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, but he that believeth not the Son hath not life, but

* Matth. iii. 2. 8. † Luke i. 29.

the

the wrath of God abideth on him,*" Since then the expiation of sin by the sacrifice of Christ is a doctrine not only taught in the Gospel itself, but enforced also by him who came only to prepare the way for it; it is evident, from the care taken to apprize the world of it even *before* Christianity was promulgated, how important and essential a part this must be of that divine religion.

Lastly, it will be of use to observe, what the particular method was which John made use of to *prepare* men for the reception and the belief of the Gospel; for whatever means he applied to the attainment of that end, the same probably we shall find the most efficacious for a similar purpose at this very day.

Now it is evident that the Baptist addressed himself, in the first instance, not to the *understanding*, but to the *heart*. He did not attempt to convince his hearers, but to reform them; he did not say to them, go and study the prophets, examine with care the pretensions of him whom I announce, and weigh accurately all the evidences of his divine mission; he well knew how all this would end,

* John iii. 36.

in

in the then corrupt state of their minds. His exhortation was therefore, "*Repent ye*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It was on this principle he reproved with so much severity the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to his baptism, whom one would think he should rather have encouraged and commended, and received with open arms. "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth, therefore, fruits meet for repentance*." Till you have done this, till you have purified your hearts and abandoned your sins, my baptism will be of no use to you, and all the reasoning in the world will have no effect upon you. In perfect conformity to this, Josephus informs us that John exhorted the Jews not to come to his baptism, without first preparing themselves for it *by the practice of virtue*, by a strict adherence to the rules of equity and justice in their dealings with one another, and by manifesting a sincere piety towards God.

This is the preparation he required: and thus it is that we also must prepare men for the reception of divine truth. We must first

* Matth iii: 7, 8.

reform,

reform, and then convince them. It is not in general the want of evidence, but the want of virtue that makes men infidels; let them cease to be wicked, and they will soon cease to be unbelievers. "It is with the heart," says St. Paul (not with the head) "that man believeth unto righteousness*." Correct the heart and all will go right. Unless the soil is good, all the seed you cast upon it will be wasted in vain. In the parable of the sower we find, that the only seed which came to perfection was that which fell on *good ground*, on an honest and a good heart. This is the first and most essential requisite to belief. Unbelievers complain of the mysteries of Revelation; but we have the highest authority for saying, that *in general* the only mystery which prevents them from receiving it, is the mystery of iniquity.

We hear, indeed, a great deal of the good nature, the benevolence, the generosity, the humanity, the honour, and the other innumerable good qualities of those that reject the Gospel; and they may possibly possess some ostentatious and popular virtues, and may

* Rom. x. 10.

keep

keep clear from flagrant and disreputable vices. But whether some gross depravity, some inveterate prejudice, or some leaven of vanity and self-conceit, does not commonly lurk in their hearts, and influence both their opinions and their practices, they who have an extensive acquaintance with the writings and the conduct of that class of men will find no difficulty in deciding. If however this was the decision of man only, the justness of it might be controverted, and the competency of the judge denied. It might be said, that it is unbecoming and presumptuous in any human being to pass severe censures on large bodies of men; and that without being able to look into the heart of man, it is impossible to form a right judgment of his moral character. This we do not deny. But if he who actually *has* that power of looking into the heart of man, if he who is perfectly well acquainted with human nature, and all the various characters of men; if *he* has declared that *men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil**, who will controvert the truth of that decision? On this authority then we may

* John iii. 19.

securely

securely rely, and may rest assured, that whatever pretences may be set up for rejecting Revelation, the grand obstacles to it are, indolence, indifference, vice, passion, prejudice, self-conceit, pride, vanity, love of singularity, a disdain to think with the vulgar, and an ambition to be considered as superior to the rest of mankind in genius, penetration, and discernment. It is by removing these impediments in the first place, that we must prepare men, as St. John did, for embracing the religion of Christ. These (to make use of prophetic language) are the *mountains* that must be made low; these the *crooked paths* that must be made straight; these the *rough places* that must be made plain. Then all difficulties will be removed, and there will be A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD. Then there will be a smooth and easy approach for the Gospel to the understanding, as well as to the heart; there will be nothing to oppose its conquest over the soul. THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHALL FULLY BE REVEALED, AND ALL FLESH SHALL SEE IT*.

* Isaiah xl. 5.

LECTURE IV.

MATTHEW iv.—former part.

THE fourth chapter of St. Matthew, at which we are now arrived, opens with an account of that most singular and extraordinary transaction, THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS. The detail of it is as follows:

"Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil: and when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterwards an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down:

for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him*."

Such is the history given by the Evangelists of our Lord's temptation, which has been a subject of much discussion among learned men. It is well known in particular that several ancient commentators, as well as many able and pious men of our own times, have thought that this temptation was not a real transaction, but only a vision or prophetic trance, similar to that which Ezekiel describes in the 8th chapter of his prophecy, and to

* Matth. iv. 1—11.

that

that which befel St. Peter when he saw a vessel descending unto him from heaven, and let down to the earth*. And it must be acknowledged that this opinion is supported by many specious arguments, and seems to remove some considerable difficulties. But upon the whole there are I think stronger reasons for adhering to the literal interpretation, than for recurring to a visionary representation.

For, in the first place, it is a rule admitted and established by the best and most judicious interpreters, that in explaining the sacred writings we ought never, without the most apparent and most indispensable necessity, allow ourselves the liberty of departing from the plain, obvious, and literal meaning of the words. Now, I conceive that no such necessity can be alleged in the present instance. It is true, that there are in this narrative many difficulties, and many extraordinary, surprising, and miraculous incidents. But the whole history of our Saviour is wonderful and miraculous from beginning to end; and if whenever we meet with a difficulty or a miracle, we may have recourse to figure, metaphor, or vision, we shall

* Acts x. 10—16.

soon reduce a great part of the sacred writings to nothing else. Besides, these difficulties will several of them admit of a fair solution; and where they do not, as they affect no article of faith or practice, they must be left among those inscrutable mysteries which it is natural to expect in a revelation from heaven. This we must after all be content to do, even if we adopt the idea of vision; for even *that* does not remove *every* difficulty, and it creates some that do not attach to the literal interpretation.

2. In the next place, I cannot find in any part of this narrative of the temptation the slightest or most distant intimation that it is nothing more than a vision. The very first words with which it commences seem to imply the direct contrary. "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil." Does not this say in the most express terms that our Lord was led, not in a dream, or trance, or vision, but was actually and literally led by the Spirit into the wilderness of Judea? There is, I know, an interpretation which explains away this obvious meaning. But that interpretation rests solely on

on the doubtful signification of a single Greek particle, which is surely much too slender a ground to justify a departure from the plain and literal sense of the passage. Certain it is, that if any one had meant to describe a real transaction, he could not have selected any expressions better adapted to that purpose than those actually made use of by the Evangelist; and I believe no one at his first reading of our Lord's temptation ever entertained the slightest idea of its being a visionary representation.

3. There is an observation which has been made, and which has great weight in this question. It is this: All the prophets of the Old Testament, except Moses, saw visions, and dreamed dreams; and the prophets of the New did the same. St. Peter had a vision, St. John saw visions, St. Paul had visions and dreams: but Christ himself neither saw visions nor dreamed dreams. He had an intimate and immediate communication with the Father; and he, and no one else in his days, had *seen* the Father. The case was the same with Moses; he saw God face to face. "If there be a prophet among you, says God to Aaron and Miriam, I the Lord will make myself

known to him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is *not* so, who is faithful in all my house; with him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold*." Now Moses we all know was a type of Christ; and the resemblance holds between them in this instance as well as in many others. They neither of them had visions or dreams, but had both an immediate communication with God. They both "saw God face to face†." This was a distinction and a mark of dignity peculiar to those two only, to the great legislator of the Jews, and the great legislator of the Christians. It is therefore inconsistent with this high privilege, this mark of superior eminence, to suppose that our Lord was tempted in a vision, when we see no other instance of a vision in the whole course of his ministry.

4. There is still another consideration which militates strongly against the supposition of a visionary temptation. It was in itself extremely probable that there should be a real and personal conflict between Christ and Satan, when

* Num. xii. 6—8. † Exod. xxxiii. 11.

the

the former was entering on his public ministry.

It is well known that the great chief of the fallen angels, who is described in Scripture under the various names of Satan, Beelzebub, the Devil, and the prince of the devils, has ever been an irreconcileable enemy of the human race, and has been constantly giving the most decided and most fatal proofs of this enmity from the beginning of the world to this hour. His hostility began with the very first creation of man upon earth, when he no sooner discovered our first parents in that state of innocence and happiness in which the gracious hand of the Almighty had just placed them, than with a malignity truly diabolical, he resolved if possible to destroy all this fair scene of virtuous bliss, and to plunge them into the gulph of sin and misery. For this purpose he exerted all his art and subtilty and powers of persuasion; and how well he succeeded, we all know and feel. From that hour he established and exercised an astonishing dominion over the minds of men, leading them into such acts of folly, stupidity, and wickedness, as can on no other principle be accounted

for. At the time of our Saviour's appearance his tyranny seems to have arrived at its utmost height, and to have extended to the bodies as well as to the souls of men, of both which he sometimes took absolute *possession:* as we see in the history of those unhappy persons mentioned in Scripture, whom we call demoniacs, and who were truly said to be *possessed* by the devil. It was therefore extremely natural to suppose, that when he found there was a great and extraordinary personage who had just made his appearance in the world, who was said to be the Son of God, the promised Saviour of mankind, that seed of the woman who was to bruise the serpent's head; it was natural that he should be exceedingly alarmed at these tidings, that he should tremble for his dominion; that he should first endeavour to ascertain the fact, whether this was really the Christ or not; and if it turned out to be so, that he should exert his utmost efforts to subdue this formidable enemy, or at least to seduce him from his allegiance to God, and divert him from his benevolent purpose towards man. He had ruined the first Adam, and he might therefore flatter himself with the hope of being

equally

equally successful with the second Adam. He had entailed a mortal disease on the human race; and to prevent their recovery from that disease, and their restoration to virtue and to happiness, would be a triumph indeed, a conquest worthy of the prince of the devils.

On the other hand it was equally probable that our blessed Lord would think it a measure highly proper to begin his ministry with showing a decided superiority over the great adversary of man, whose empire he was going to abolish; with manifesting to mankind that the great Captain of their salvation was able to accomplish the important work he had undertaken, and with setting an example of virtuous firmness to his followers, which might encourage them to resist the most powerful temptations that the prince of darkness could throw in their way.

These considerations, in addition to many others, afford a strong ground for believing that the temptation of Christ in the wilderness was, as the history itself plainly intimates, a real transaction, a personal contest between the great enemy and the great Redeemer of the human race; and in this point of view therefore

therefore I shall proceed to consider some of the most remarkable circumstances attending it, and the practical uses resulting from it*.

We are told in the first place that "Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness," that is, not by the evil spirit, but by the Spirit of God, by the suggestions and by the impulse of the Holy Ghost, of whose divine influences he was then full. For the time when this happened was immediately after his baptism, which

* It is an ingenious observation of a learned friend of mine, that the temptation of Christ in the wilderness bears an evident analogy to the trial of Adam in Paradise, and elucidates the nature of that trial in which the tempter prevailed and man fell. The *second* Adam, who undertook the cause of fallen men, was subjected to temptation by the same apostate spirit. Herein the tempter failed, and the second Adam in consequence became the restorer of the fallen race of the first. St. Paul, in more places than one, points out the resemblance between the first Adam and the second; and the temptation in the wilderness exhibits a most interesting transaction, where the second Adam was actually placed in a situation very similar to that of the first. The secrets of the Most High are unfathomable to short-sighted mortals; but it would appear from what may be humbly learnt and inferred from this transaction, that our blessed Lord's temptation by Satan was a necessary part in the divine œconomy towards accomplishing the redemption of mankind.

is related in the conclusion of the preceding chapter. We are there informed that "Jesus when he was baptized went up straightway out of the water, and, lo, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him. And, lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased*." *Then* (it immediately follows) was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil. In that moment of exaltation, when he was acknowledged by a voice from heaven to be the Son of God, and when the Spirit of God had taken full possession of his soul, then it was that Jesus went forth under the guidance of that Spirit, in full confidence of his divine power, into the wilderness, to encounter the prince of this world. A plain proof that this contest was a preconcerted design, a measure approved by Heaven, and subservient to the grand design, in which our Saviour was engaged, of rescuing mankind from the dominion of Satan.

The place into which our blessed Lord was thus led was *the wilderness*, probably the *great wilderness* near the river Jordan, in which Jesus

* Matth. iii. 16, 17.

was

was baptized, and soon afterwards tempted. This wilderness is thus described by a traveller of great credit and veracity, who had himself seen it. "In a few hours (says this writer) we arrived at that mountainous desert, in which our Saviour was led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. It is a most miserable dry barren place, consisting of high rocky mountains, so torn and disordered as if the earth had suffered some great convulsion, in which its very bowels had been turned outward. On the left hand, looking down into a deep valley, as we passed along we saw some ruins of small cells and cottages, which we were told were formerly the habitations of hermits retiring hither for penance and mortification; and certainly there could not be found in the whole earth a more comfortless and abandoned place for that purpose. On descending from these hills of desolation into the plain, we soon came to the foot of Mount Quarrantania, which they say is the mountain from whence the devil tempted our Saviour with that visionary scene of all the kingdoms and glories of this world. It is, as St. Matthew calls it, *an exceeding high mountain*, and in its ascent difficult

difficult and dangerous. It has a small chapel at the top, and another about half way up, on a prominent part of a rock. Near this latter are several caves and holes in the sides of the mountain, made use of anciently by hermits, and by some at this day for places to keep their Lent in, in imitation of that of our blessed Saviour *."

This was a theatre perfectly proper for the prince of the fallen angels to act his part upon, and perfectly well suited to his dark malignant purposes.

Here then after our Saviour (as Moses and Elijah had done before him) had endured a long abstinence from food, the devil abruptly and artfully assailed him with a temptation well calculated to produce a powerful effect on a person faint and worn out with fasting. "If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." But our Saviour repelled this insidious advice by quoting the words of Moses to the Israelites in the wilderness: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the

* Maundrell.

mouth

mouth of God*." That is, he that brought me into this wilderness, and subjected me to these trials, can support me under the pressure of hunger, by a variety of means, besides the common one of bread, just as he fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna, with food from heaven. I will therefore rather choose to rely on his gracious providence for my support in this exigency, than work a miracle myself for the supply of my wants.

This answer was perfectly conformable to the principle on which our Lord acted throughout the whole of his ministry. All his miracles were wrought for the benefit of others, not one for his own gratification. Though he endured hunger and thirst, and indigence and fatigue, and all the other evils of a laborious and an itinerant life, yet he never once relieved himself from any of these inconveniencies, or procured a single comfort to himself by the working of miracles. These were all appropriated to the grand object of proving the truth of his religion and the reality of his divine mission, and he never applied them to any other purpose. And in this, as in all other cases, he acted

* Deut. viii. 3. Matth. iv. 4.

with

with the most perfect wisdom; for had he always or often delivered himself from the sufferings and the distresses incident to human nature by the exertions of his miraculous powers, the benefit of his example would have been in a great measure lost to mankind, and it would have been of little use to us, *that he was in all things tempted like as we are**, because he would have been supported and succoured as *we* cannot expect to be.

Having thus failed in attempting to work upon one of the strongest of the sensual appetites, *hunger*, the tempter's next application was to a different passion, but one which in some minds is extremely powerful, and often leads to great folly and guilt, I mean vanity and self-importance. "He taketh our Lord into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, if thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they will bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone†."

* Heb. iv. 15. † Matth. iv. 5, 6.

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It has been thought an insuperable difficulty to conceive how Satan could, from any mountain however elevated, shew to our Saviour all the kingdoms of the earth, and the glory of them. And even they who defend the literal sense of the transaction in general, yet have recourse to a visionary representation in this particular instance. But there seems to me no necessity for calling in the help of a vision even here. The Evangelist describes the mountain on which Christ was placed as an *exceeding high one*; and the traveller* to whom I before referred, describes it in the same terms. From thence of course there must have been a very extensive view; and accordingly another writer, the Abbé Mariti, in his travels through Cyprus, &c. speaking of this mountain, says, "Here we enjoyed the most beautiful prospect imaginable. This part of the mountain overlooks the mountains of Arabia, the country of Gilead, the country of the Ammonites, the plains of Moab, the plain of Jericho, the river Jordan, and the whole extent of the Dead Sea." These various domains the tempter might shew to our Lord distinctly, and might also at

* Maundrell.

the

the same time *point out* (for so the original word δείκνυμι sometimes signifies) and direct our Lord's eye towards several other regions that lay beyond them, which might comprehend all the principal kingdoms of the eastern world. And he might then properly enough say, "All these kingdoms which you now see, or towards which I now point, will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me." This explanation appears to me an easy and a natural one. But if others think differently, it is sufficient to say, that this particular incident is not more extraordinary than almost every other part of this very singular transaction; throughout the whole of which, the devil appears to have been permitted to exercise a power far beyond what naturally belonged to him.

But whatever we may decide on this point, the nature and magnitude of the temptation are evident. It is no less than an offer of kingdoms, with all their glory; all the honours, power, rank, wealth, grandeur, and magnificence, that this world has to give. But all these put together could not for one moment shake the firm mind of our divine Master, or seduce him from the duty he owed

to God. He rejected with abhorrence the impious proposition made to him, and answered with a proper indignation, in the words of Scripture, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve*." Upon this we are told that the devil left him, and that angels came and ministered unto him.

Thus ended this memorable scene of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. The reasons of it respecting our Lord have been already explained; the instructions it furnishes to ourselves are principally these:

1. It teaches us, that even the best of men may sometimes be permitted to fall into great temptations, for we see that our blessed Lord himself was exposed to the severest. They are not therefore to be considered as marks of God's displeasure or desertion of us, but only as trials of our virtue; as means of proving (as Moses tells the Israelites) what is in our hearts, whether we will keep God's commandments or no†; as opportunities graciously afforded us to demonstrate our sincerity,

* Matth. iv. 10, 11. † Deut. viii. 2.

verity, our fortitude, our integrity, our unshaken allegiance and fidelity to the great Ruler of the world.

2. Whenever we are thus brought into temptation, we have every reason to hope for the divine assistance to extricate us from danger. We have the example of our blessed Lord to encourage us. We see the great Captain of our salvation assaulted by all the art and all the power of Satan, and yet rising superior to all his efforts. We see him going before us in the paths of virtue and of glory, and calling upon us to follow him. Though he was led by the Spirit of God himself into the wilderness in order to be tempted, yet the same divine Spirit accompanied and supported him throughout the whole of his bitter conflict, and enabled him to triumph over his infernal adversary. To the same heavenly Spirit *we* also may look for deliverance. If we implore God in fervent prayer to send him to us, he will assuredly grant our petition. He will not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able, but will with the temptation also *make* a way to escape (when

we ourselves cannot *find* one) that we may be able to bear it.*

3. We may learn from the conduct of our Lord under this great trial, that when temptations assail us, we are not to parley or to reason with them, to hesitate and deliberate whether we shall give way to them or not, but must at once repel them with firmness and with vigour, and oppose to the dictates of our passions the plain and positive commands of God in his holy word. We must say resolutely to the tempter, as our Lord did, "Get thee hence, Satan†;" and he will instantly flee from *us* as he did from *him*.

4. It is a most solid consolation to us under such contests as these, that if we honestly exert our utmost efforts to vanquish the enemies of our salvation, most humbly and devoutly soliciting at the same time the influences of divine grace to aid our weak endeavours, the unavoidable errors and imperfections of our nature will not be ascribed to us, nor will God be extreme to mark every thing that is done amiss; for we shall not be judged by one who has no *feeling* of our infirmities, but by one

* 1 Cor. x. 13. † Matth. iv. 10.

who

who knows and who pities them, who was himself in all things tempted like as we are, yet without sin*, and who will therefore make all due allowances for our involuntary failings, though none for our wilful transgressions.

5. And lastly, in the various allurements presented to our Lord, we see but too faithful a picture of those we are to expect ourselves in our progress through life. Our Lord's temptations were, as we have seen, sensual gratifications, incitements to vanity and ostentation, and the charms of wealth, power, rank, and splendour. All these will in the different stages of our existence successively rise up to seduce us, to oppose our progress to heaven, and bring us into captivity to sin and misery. Pleasure, interest, business, honour, glory, fame, all the follies and all the corruptions of the world, will each in their turn assault our feeble nature; and through these we must manfully fight our way to the great end we have in view. But the difficulty and the pain of this contest will be considerably lessened by a resolute and vigorous exertion of our powers and our resources at our first setting out in

* Heb. iv. 15.

life. It was immediately after his baptism, and at the beginning of his ministry, that our Lord was exposed to all the power and all the artifices of the devil, and completely triumphing over both, effectually secured himself from all future attempts of that implacable enemy. In the same manner it is on our first setting out in life, that we are to look for the most violent assaults from our passions within, and from the world and the prince of it without. And if we strenuously resist those enemies of our salvation that present themselves to us at that most critical and dangerous period, all the rest that follow in our maturer age will be an easy conquest. On him who in the beginning of life has preserved himself unspotted from the world, all its consequent attractions and allurements, and its magnificence, wealth, and splendour, will make little or no impression. A mind that has been long habituated to discipline and self-government amidst far more powerful temptations, will have nothing to apprehend from such assailants as these. But after all, our great security is assistance from above, which will never be denied to those who fervently apply for it.

And with the power of divine grace to support us, with the example of our Lord in the wilderness to animate us, and an eternity of happiness to reward us, what is there that can shake our constancy or corrupt our fidelity?

Set yourselves then without delay to acquire an early habit of strict self-government, and an early intercourse with your heavenly protector and comforter. Let it be your first care to establish the sovereignty of reason and the empire of grace over your soul, and you will soon find it no difficulty to repel the most powerful temptations. "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith; quit yourselves like men; be strong†," be resolute, be patient; look frequently up to the prize that is set before you, lest you be weary and faint in your minds. Consider that every pleasure you sacrifice to your duty here, will be placed to your credit and increase your happiness hereafter. The conflict with your passions will grow less irksome every day. A few years (with some of you perhaps a *very* few) will put an entire end to it; and you will then, to your unspeakable

* † Cor. xvi, 13.

comfort,

comfort, be enabled to cry out with St. Paul, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me in that day*."

* 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

LECTURE V.

MATTHEW iv.—latter part.

THE former part of the fourth chapter of St. Matthew, which contains the history of our Saviour's temptation, having been explained to you in the preceding Lecture, I shall now proceed to the latter part of the chapter, in which an account is given of the first opening of our blessed Lord's ministry, by his preaching, by his chusing a few companions to attend him, and by his beginning to work miracles; all which things are stated very briefly, without any attempt to expatiate on the importance and magnitude of the subject, which was nevertheless the noblest and most interesting that is to be found in history; an enterprize the most stupendous and astonishing that ever before entered into the mind of man, nothing less than the conversion of

of a whole world from wickedness and idolatry to virtue and true religion.

On this vast undertaking our Lord now entered; and we are informed by St. Matthew, in the 17th verse of this chapter, in what *manner* he first announced himself and his religion to the world. His first address to the people was similar to that of the Baptist, *Repent* ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The very first qualification he required of those who aspired to be his disciples was *repentance*, a sincere contrition for all past offences, and a resolution to renounce in future every species of sin; for sin, he well knew, would be the grand obstacle to the reception of his Gospel.

What a noble idea does this present to us of the dignity and sanctity of our divine religion! It cannot even be *approached* by the unhallowed and the profane. Before they can be admitted even into the outward courts of its sanctuary, they must leave their corrupt appetite and their sinful practices behind them. "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet," said God to Moses from the burning bush, "for

"for the place whereon thou standest is *holy* "*ground**." Put off all thy vicious habits, says Christ to every one that aspires to be his disciple, for the religion thou art to embrace is a holy religion, and the God thou art to serve is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot even *look* upon iniquity. In some of the ancient sects of philosophy, before any one could be admitted into their schools, or initiated in their mysteries, he was obliged to undergo a certain course of preparation, a certain term of trial and probation, which however consisted of little more than a few superstitious ceremonies, or some acts of external discipline and purification. But the preparation for receiving the Christian religion is *the preparation of the heart.* The discipline required for a participation of its privileges, is the mortification of sin, the sacrifice of every guilty propensity and desire.

This sacrifice however the great Founder of our religion did not require for nothing. He promised his followers a recompence infinitely beyond the indulgences they were to renounce; he promised them a place in his

* Exod. iii, 5.

KINGDOM,

KINGDOM, a kingdom of which he was the sovereign; a kingdom of righteousness here, and of glory hereafter. *Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**.

He then proceeds to select and associate to himself a certain number of persons, who were to be his assistants and coadjutors in the establishment and the administration of his heavenly kingdom.

And here it was natural to expect, that in making his choice he should look to men of influence, authority, and weight; that, being himself destitute of all the advantages of rank, power, wealth, and learning, he should endeavour to compensate for those defects in his own person by the contrary qualities of his associates, by connecting himself with some of the most powerful, most opulent, most learned, and most eloquent men of his time.

And this most undoubtedly would have been his mode of proceeding, had his object been to establish his religion by mere *human* means, by influence or by force, by the charms of eloquence, by the powers of reason, by the example, by the authority, by the fashion of

* Matth. iv. 17.

the-

the great. But these were not the instruments which Christ meant to make use of. He meant to shew that he was *above* them all; that he had far other resources, far different auxiliaries, to call in to his support, in comparison of which all the wealth and magnificence, and power and wisdom of the world, were trivial and contemptible things. We find therefore that not the wise, not the mighty, not the noble, were called* to co-operate with him; but men of the meanest birth, of the lowest occupations, of the humblest talents, and most uncultivated minds. "As he was walking by the sea of Galilee, St. Matthew tells us, he saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of *men*; and they straightway left their nets (that is, in fact, all their subsistence, all the little property they had in the world), and followed him. And going from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called

* 1 Cor. i. 26.

them,

them, and they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him *." These were the men whom he selected for his companions and assistants. These fishermen of Galilee were to be, under him, the instruments of overthrowing the stupendous and magnificent system of paganism and idolatry throughout the world, and producing the greatest change, the most general and most important revolution in principles, in morals, and in religion, that ever took place on this globe. For this astonishing work, these simple, illiterate, humble men, were singled out by our Lord. He chose, as the apostle expresses it, "the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty †; that his religion might not be established by the enticing words of man's wisdom, but by demonstration of the spirit and of power; that our faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God ‡."

Such were the associates chosen by him, who was the delegate of heaven, and whose

* Matth. iv. 18—22. † 1 Cor. i. 27.
‡ 1 Cor. ii. 4, 5.

help

help was from above. We may expect therefore that an impostor, who meant to rely on *human* means for success, would take a directly *contrary* course. And this we find in fact to be the case. Who were the companions and assistants selected by the grand impostor Mahomet? They were men of the most weight and authority, and rank and influence, among his countrymen. The reason is obvious; *he* wanted such supports; *Christ* did not; and hence the marked difference of their conduct in this instance. It is the natural difference between truth and imposture. That the power of God and not of man was the foundation on which our Lord meant to erect his new system, very soon appeared; for the next thing we hear of him is, that he "went about all Galilee teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people*."

Here then began that DEMONSTRATION OF THE SPIRIT AND OF POWER, which was to be the grand basis of his new kingdom, the

* Matth. iv. 23.

great evidence of his heavenly mission. It is indeed probable that the wisdom and the authority with which he spake, and the weight and importance of the doctrines he taught, would of themselves make a deep impression on the minds of his hearers, and produce him some followers. But had he stopt here, had he given his new disciples nothing but words, their zeal and attachment to him would soon have abated. For it was natural for these converts to say to him, "You have called upon us to repent and to reform; you have commanded us to renounce our vices, to relinquish our favourite pleasures and pursuits, to give up the world and its enjoyments, and to take up our cross and follow you; and in return for this you promise us distinguished happiness and honour in your spiritual kingdom. You speak, it is true, most forcibly to our consciences and to our hearts; and we feel strongly disposed to obey your injunctions, and to credit your promises; but still the sacrifice we are required to make is a great one, and a conflict we have to go through is a bitter one. We find it a most painful struggle

to

to subdue confirmed habits, and to part at once with all our accustomed pleasures and indulgences. Before then we can entirely relinquish these, and make a complete change in the temper of our souls and the conduct of our lives, we must have some convincing proof that you have a right to require this compliance at our hands; that what you enjoin us is in reality the command of God himself; that you are actually sent from heaven, and commissioned by him to teach us his will, and to instruct us in our duty; that the kingdom you hold out to us in another world is something more than mere imagination: that you are in short what you pretend to be, the SON OF GOD; and that you are able to make good the punishment you denounce against sin, and the rewards you promise to virtue."

Our Lord well knew that this sort of reasoning must occur to every man's mind. He knew that it was highly proper and indispensably necessary to give some evidence of his divine commission, to do SOMETHING which should satisfy the world that he was the Son of God, and the delegate of heaven. And

how could he do this so effectually as by performing works which it utterly exceeded all the strength and ability of man to accomplish, and which nothing less than the hand of God himself could possibly bring to pass? In other words, the proofs he gave of his mission were those astonishing miracles which are recorded in the Gospel, and which are here for the first time mentioned by St. Matthew, in the 23d verse of this chapter: "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people."

This then is the primary, the fundamental evidence of his divine authority, which our Lord was pleased to give to his followers. His first application, as we have seen, was (like that of his precursor John the Baptist) to their *hearts*, "REPENT YE," lay aside your vices and your prejudices. Till this was done, till these grand obstacles to the admission of truth were removed, he well knew that all he could say and all he could do would have no effect;

effect; they would not be moved either by his exhortations or his miracles; "they would not be persuaded though one rose from the dead*." And in fact we find that several of the pharisees, men abandoned to vice and wickedness, did actually resist the miracles of Christ, and the resurrection of a man from the grave; they ascribed his casting out devils to Beelzebub; they were not convinced by the cure of the blind man, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead, though they saw them both before their eyes, one restored to sight, the other to life. This plainly proves how far the power of sin and of prejudice will go in closing up all the avenues of the mind against conviction; and how wisely our Saviour acted in calling upon his hearers to repent, before he offered any evidence to their understandings. But the way being thus cleared, the evidence was then produced, and the effect it had was such as might be expected; for St. Matthew tells us, that his fame went throughout all Syria: and that there followed him *great multitudes* of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judea, and

* Luke, xvi. 31.

from beyond Jordan*; that is, from every quarter of his own country and the adjoining nations.

And indeed it can be no wonder that such multitudes were convinced and converted by what they saw. The wonder would have been if they had not. To those who were themselves eye-witnesses of his miracles, they must have been (except in a few instances of inveterate depravity of heart) irresistible proofs of his divine mission. When they saw him give eyes to the blind, feet to the lame, health to the sick, and even life to the dead, by speaking only a few words; what other conclusion could they possibly draw than that which the centurion did, *truly this was the Son of God*†? To us indeed who have not seen these mighty works, and who live at the distance of eighteen hundred years from the time when they were wrought, the force of this evidence is undoubtedly less than it was to an eye-witness. But if the reality of these miracles is proved to us by sufficient testimony, by testimony such as no ingenuous and unprejudiced mind can withstand, they

* Matth. iv. 24, 25. † Matth. xxvii. 54.

ought

ought still to produce in us the firmest belief of the divine power of him who wrought them *.

It must be admitted at the same time that these miracles, being facts of a very uncommon and very extraordinary nature, such as have never happened in our own times, and but very seldom even in former times, they require a much stronger degree of testimony to support them than common historical facts. And this degree of testimony they actually have. They are supported by a body of evidence fully adequate to the case; fully competent to outweigh all the disadvantages arising from the great distance and the astonishing nature of the events in question.

1. In the first place, these miracles are recorded in four different histories, written very near the time of their being performed, by four different men, Matthew, Mark,

* Mr. Hume's abstruse and sophistical argument against miracles, has been completely refuted by Drs. Adams, Campbell, and Paley.

Luke, and John; two of whom saw these miracles with their own eyes; the other two had their account from them who did the same; and affirm, that "they had a perfect knowledge of every thing they relate*."

They were plain artless men, without the least appearance of enthusiasm or credulity about them, and rather slow than forward to believe any thing extraordinary and out of the common course of nature. They were perfectly competent to judge of plain matters of fact, of things which passed before their eyes, and could certainly tell, without the least possibility of being mistaken, whether a person whom they knew to be blind was actually restored to sight, and a person whom they knew to be dead was raised to life again by a few words spoken by their master. They were men, who, from the simplicity of their manners, were not at all likely to invent and publish falsehoods of so extraordinary a nature; much less falsehoods by which they could

* Luke, i. 3.

gain

gain nothing, and did in fact lose every thing. There is not therefore, from the peculiar character of these persons, the least ground for disbelieving the reality of any thing they relate. Nor is there any reason to doubt whether the writings we now have under their names are those which they actually wrote. They have been received as such ever since they were published; nor has any one argument been yet produced against their authenticity, which has not been repeatedly and effectually confuted.

2. It is a very strong circumstance in favour of our Saviour's miracles, that they were related by contemporary historians, by those who were eye-witnesses of them, and were afterwards acknowledged to be true by those who lived nearest to the times in which they were wrought; and what is still more to the point, by many who were hostile to the Christian religion. Even the emperor Julian himself, that most bitter adversary of Christianity, who had openly

openly apostatized from it, who professed the most implacable hatred to it, who employed all his ingenuity, all his acuteness and learning, which were considerable, in combating the truth of it, in displaying in the strongest colours every objection he could raise up against it; even *he* did not deny the *reality* of our Lord's miracles*. He admitted that Jesus wrought them, but contended that he wrought them by the power of magic.

3. Unless we admit that the Founder of our religion did actually work the miracles ascribed to him by his historians, it is utterly impossible to account for the success and establishment of his religion. It could not, in short, to all appearance, have been established by any other means.

* Julian apud Cyrillum, L. vi. viii. x. Celsus also acknowledged the truth of the gospel-miracles in general, but ascribed them to the assistance of demons. "The Christians, says he, seem to *prevail*, δαιμονων τινων ονομασι και κατακλησεσι, by virtue of the names and the invocation of certain demons." Orig. contra Celsum. ed. Cantab. l. i. p. 7.

Consider

Consider only for a moment what the apparent condition of our Lord was, when he first announced his mission among the Jews, what his pretensions and what his doctrines were, and then judge what kind of a reception he must have met with among the Jews, had his preaching been accompanied by no miracles. A young man of no education, born, in an obscure village, of obscure parents, without any of those very brilliant talents or exterior accomplishments which usually captivate the hearts of men; without having previously written or done any thing that should excite the expectation, or attract the attention and admiration of the world, offers himself at once to the Jewish nation, not merely as a preacher of morality, but as a teacher sent from heaven; nay, what is more, as the Son of God himself, and as that great deliverer, the Messiah, who had been so long predicted by the prophets, and was then so anxiously expected and so eagerly looked for by the whole Jewish people. He called upon this people to renounce at once a great part of the religion of their forefathers, and

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to adopt that which he proposed to them; to relinquish all their fond ideas of a splendid, a victorious, a triumphant Messiah, and to accept in his room a despised, a persecuted, and a crucified master: he required them to give up all their former prejudices, superstitions, and traditions, all their favourite rites and ceremonies, and, what was perhaps still dearer to them, their favourite vices and propensities, their hypocrisy, their rapaciousness, their voluptuousness. Instead of exterior forms, he prescribed sanctity of manners; instead of washing their hands, and making clean their platters, he commanded them to purify their hearts and reform their lives. Instead of indulging in ease and luxury, he called upon them to take up their cross and follow him through sorrows and sufferings; to pluck out a right eye, and to cut off a right arm; to leave father, mother, brethren, and sisters, for his name's sake, and the Gospel.

What now shall we say to doctrines such as these, delivered by such a person as our Lord appeared to be? Is it probable, is it possible, that the reputed son of a poor

mechanic could, by the mere force of argument or persuasion, induce vast numbers of his countrymen to embrace opinions and practices so directly opposite to every propensity of their hearts, to every sentiment they had imbibed, every principle they had acted upon from their earliest years? Yet the fact is, that he *did* prevail on multitudes to do so; and therefore he *must* have had means of conviction superior to all human eloquence or reasoning; that is, he must have convinced his hearers by the miracles he wrought, that all power in heaven and in earth was given to him, and that every precept he delivered and every doctrice he taught, was the voice of God himself. Without this it is utterly impossible to give any rational account of his success.

In order to set this argument in a still stronger point of view, let us consider what the effect actually was in a case where a new religion was proposed without any support from miracles. That same impostor Mahomet, to whom I before alluded, began his mission with every advantage that could arise

arise from personal figure, from insinuating manners, from a commanding eloquence, from an ardent enterprising spirit, from considerable wealth, and from powerful connections. Yet with all these advantages, and with every artifice and every dexterous contrivance to recommend his new religion to his countrymen, in the space of three years he made only about six converts, and those principally of his own family, relations, and most intimate friends. And his progress was but very slow for nine years after this, till he began to make use of force; and then his victorious arms, not his arguments, carried his religion triumphantly over almost all the eastern world.

It appears therefore, that without the assistance either of miracles or of the sword, no religion can be propagated with such rapidity, and to such an extent, as the Christian was, both during our Saviour's lifetime, and after his death. For there is, I believe, no instance in the history of mankind of such an effect being produced, without either the one or the other. Now of force

force we know that Jesus never did make use; the unavoidable consequence is, that the miracles ascribed to him were actually wrought by him.

4. These miracles being wrought not in the midst of friends, who were disposed to favour them, but of most bitter and determined enemies, whose passions and whose prejudices were all up in arms, all vigorous and active against them and their author; we may rest assured that no false pretence to a supernatural power, no frauds, no collusions, no impositions, would be suffered to pass undetected and unexposed; that every single miracle would be most critically and most rigorously sifted and enquired into, and no art left unemployed to destroy their credit and counteract their effect. And this in fact we find to be the case. Look into the ninth chapter of St. John, and you will see with what extreme care and diligence, with what anxiety and solicitude the pharisees examined and re-examined the blind man that was restored to sight by our Saviour, and what pains they took to

persuade

persuade him, and to make him say, that he was *not* restored to sight by Jesus.

"They brought," says St. John, "to the pharisees, him that aforetime was blind; and the pharisees asked him how he had received his sight. And he said unto them, Jesus put clay upon mine eyes, and I washed, and did see. A plain and simple and honest relation of the fact. But the Jews, not content with this, called for his parents, and asked them, saying, Is this your son who ye say was born blind? How then doth he now see? His parents, afraid of bringing themselves into danger, very discreetly answered, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now seeth we know not, or who hath opened his eyes we know not; he is of age, ask him, he shall speak for himself. They then called the man again, and said to him, Give God the praise; we know that this man (meaning Jesus) is a sinner. The man's answer is admirable: Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not; but this I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see. Since the world began, was it not known that any man opened the eyes of

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one that was born blind. If this man were not of God, he could do nothing. And they answered him and said, Thou wast altogether born in sin, and dost *thou* teach us? And they cast him out." A very effectual way it must be confessed of confuting a miracle!

The whole of this narrative (from which I have only selected a few of the most striking passages) is highly curious and instructive, and would furnish ample matter for a variety of very important remarks. But the only use I mean to make of it at present is to observe, that it proves, in the clearest manner, how very much awake and alive the Jews were to every part of our Saviour's conduct. It shews that his miracles were presented not to persons prepossessed and prejudiced in his favour, not to inattentive or negligent or credulous spectators, but to acute and inquisitive and hostile observers, to men disposed and able to detect imposture wherever it could be found. And it is utterly impossible that the miracles of Christ could have passed the fiery ordeal of so much shrewdness and sagacity, and authority and malignity, united, if they had not been carried through it by the irresistible

force of truth, and of that divine power which nothing could resist.

5. The miracles of our Lord were not merely transient acts, beheld at the moment with astonishment, but forgot as soon as over, and productive of no important consequences. They gave birth to a new religion, to a new mode of worship, to several new and singular institutions, such as the right of baptism, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the appropriation of the *first* day of the week to sacred purposes, the establishment of a distinct order of men for the celebration of divine offices, and other things of the same nature. Now this religion and these institutions subsist to this day. And as the books of the New Testament affirm that this religion and these institutions were first established, and afterward made their way by the power of miracles, they are standing testimonies to the truth and the reality of those miracles, without which they could never have taken such firm and deep root at the first, and continued unshaken through so many ages to the present time. The magnitude and permanency of

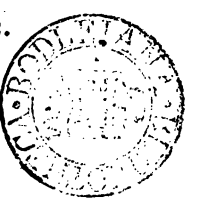
the superstructure prove that it could not have had a less solid, a less substantial foundation.

6. And, lastly, when we consider the great sacrifices made by the first converts to Christianity, particularly by the apostles and primitive teachers of it; how many deep-rooted prejudices and favourite opinions they gave up to it; what a total change it produced in their disposition, their temper, their manners, their principles, their habits, and the whole complexion of their lives; what infinite pains they took to propagate it; how cheerfully they relinquished for this purpose all the ease, the comfort, the conveniences, the pleasures, and the advantages of life; and instead of them embraced labours, hardships, sufferings, persecutions, torments, and death itself; we cannot rationally suppose that such patience, resignation, fortitude, magnanimity, and perseverance, could possibly be produced by any less powerful cause than those evidences of divine power exhibited in the miracles of Christ; which demonstrably proved that he and his religion had a divine original, and that therefore the sufferings they underwent for his sake

in the present life would be amply repaid by the glorious rewards reserved for them hereafter.

When therefore we put together all these considerations, they can leave no doubt on any unprejudiced mind, that the account given in this chapter of the first commencement of our Saviour's ministry, and the reasons of his astonishing success, are perfectly accurate and true: namely, "that he went about all Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness, and all manner of disease among the people." And our conclusion from this must necessarily be the same with that of the great Jewish ruler, who, with a laudable anxiety to know the truth, came to Jesus by night, and addressed him in these words: "Rabbi, we *know* that thou art a teacher come from God: *for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.*"*

* John iii. 2.



LECTURE VI.

MATTH. CHAP. v.

OUR blessed Lord having by his miracles established his divine authority, and acquired of course a right to the attention of his hearers, and a powerful influence over their minds, proceeds in the next place to explain to them in some degree the nature of his religion, the duties it enjoins, and the dispositions it requires. This he does in what is commonly called his Sermon on the Mount; which is a discourse of considerable length, being extended through this and the two following chapters; and we may venture to say it contains a greater variety of new, important, and excellent moral precepts, than is any where to be found in the same compass. At the same time it does not pretend to give a regular, complete, and perfect system of ethics, or to

lay down rules for the regulation of our conduct in every possible instance that can arise. This would have been an endless task, and would have multiplied precepts to a degree that would, in a great measure, have defeated their utility and destroyed their effect*. Our Lord took the wiser and more impressive method of tracing out to us only the great outlines of our duty, of giving us general principles and comprehensive rules, which we may ourselves apply to particular cases, and the various situations in which we may be placed.

He begins with describing those dispositions and virtues which mark the Christian character, in which the Gospel peculiarly delights, but which the world despises and rejects.

"Blessed," says, he, "are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.

* Vid. John, xxi. 25.

Blessed

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake: rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven*."

It is evident that our Lord here meant, at the very outset of his public instructions, to mark at once, in the strongest and most decided terms, the peculiar temper, spirit, and character of his religion; and to shew to his disciples how completely opposite they were to all those splendid and popular qualities which were the great objects of admiration and applause to the heathen world; and are still too much so even to the Christian world. "There are (as a very able advocate for Christianity well observes†) two opposite characters

* Matth. v. 3—12. † Dr. Paley, V. ii. p. 30.

under which mankind may generally be classed. The one possesses vigour, firmness, resolution, is daring and active, quick in its sensibilities, jealous of its fame, eager in its attachments, inflexible in its purposes, violent in its resentments.

"The other, meek, yielding, complying, forgiving: not prompt to act, but willing to suffer; silent and gentle under rudeness and insult; suing for reconciliation where others would demand satisfaction; giving way to the pushes of impudence; conceding and indulgent to the prejudices, the wrongheadedness, the intractability of those with whom he has to deal."

The former of these characters is and ever has been the favourite of the world; and though it is too stern to conciliate affection, yet it has an appearance of dignity in it which too commonly commands respect.

The latter is, as our Lord describes it, humble, meek, lowly, devout, merciful, pure, peaceable, patient, and unresisting. The world calls it mean-spirited, tame, and abject; yet notwithstanding all this, with the divine Author of our religion this is the favourite character; this is the constant topic of his

his commendation: this is the subject that runs through all the beatitudes. To this he assigns, under all its various forms, peculiar blessings. To those who possess it, he promises that they shall inherit the earth; that they shall obtain mercy; that theirs shall be the kingdom of heaven; that they shall see God, and shall be called the *children* of God.

The recommendation of this character recurs frequently in different shapes throughout the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, and a great part of that discourse is nothing more than a comment on the text of the beatitudes. On these, and a few other passages which have any thing particularly novel and important in them, I shall offer some observations.

But before I quit this noble and consolatory exordium of our Lord's discourse, I shall request your attention to one particular part of it, which seems to require a little explanation.

The part I allude to is this: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

The blessing here promised to the meek, seems at first sight somewhat singular, and not

not very appropriate to the virtue recommended.

That the *meek* of all others should be destined to inherit the earth, is what one should not naturally have expected. If we may judge from what passes in the world, it is those of a quite opposite character, the bold, the forward, the active, the enterprising, the rapacious, the ambitious, that are best calculated to secure to themselves that inheritance. And undoubtedly, if by inheriting the earth is meant acquiring the wealth, the grandeur, the power, the property of the earth, these are the persons who generally seize on a large proportion of those good things, and leave the meek and the gentle far behind them in this unequal contest for such advantages. But it was far other things than these our Lord had in view. By inheriting the earth, he meant inheriting those things which are, without question, the greatest *blessings* upon earth, calmness and composure of spirit, tranquillity, cheerfulness, peace and comfort of mind. Now these, I apprehend, are the peculiar portion and recompence of the *meek*. Unassuming, gentle, and humble in their deportment, they give

give no offence, they create no enemies, they provoke no hostilities, and thus escape all that large proportion of human misery which arises from dissensions and disputes. If differences *do* unexpectedly start up, by patience, mildness, and prudence, they disarm their adversaries, they soften resentment, they court reconciliation, and seldom fail of restoring harmony and peace. Having a very humble opinion of themselves, they see others succeed without uneasiness, without envy: having no ambition, no spirit of competition, they feel no pain from disappointment, no mortification from defeat. By bending under the storms that assail them, they greatly mitigate their violence, and see them pass over their heads almost without feeling their force. Content and satisfied with their lot, they pass quietly and silently through the crowds that surround them; and encounter much fewer difficulties and calamities in their progress through life than more active and enterprising men. This even tenor of life may indeed be called by men of the world, flat, dull, and insipid. But the meek are excluded from no rational pleasure, no legitimate delight; and

as

as they are more exempt from anxiety and pain than other men, their sum total of happiness is greater, and they may, in the best sense of the word, be fairly said *to inherit the earth.*

I shall now proceed to notice such other passages of this admirable discourse, as appear to me to deserve peculiar attention and consideration.

The first of these is that which begins with the 21st verse; "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill, shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; but whosoever shall say, thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." And again in the same manner at the 27th verse; "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

I put

I put these two instances together, because they both enforce the same great leading principle, and both illustrate one great distinguishing excellence of the morality taught by our Saviour; namely, that it does not content itself with merely controlling our outward actions, but it goes much deeper, it imposes its restraints, it places its guard exactly where it ought to do, on our thoughts and on our hearts. Our Lord here singles out two cases, referring to two different species of passions, the malevolent and the sensual; and he pronounces the same sentence, the same decisive judgment on both; that the thing to be regulated is the *intention*, the *passion*, the *propensity*. Former moralists contented themselves with saying, thou shalt not kill. But *I* (says our Lord) go much further; *I* say, thou shalt not indulge any *resentment* against thy brother, thou shalt not use any reproachful or contemptuous language towards him; for it is these things that lead and provoke to the most atrocious deeds. Former moralists have said, thou shalt not commit adultery. But *I* say, let not thine *heart* or thine *eye* commit adultery; for

for here it is that the sin begins; and here it must be crushed in its birth.

This is wisdom, this is morality in its most perfect form, in its essence, and in its first principles. Every one that is acquainted with men and manners must know that our Lord has here shewn a consummate knowledge of human nature; that he has laid his finger on the right place, and exerted his authority where it was most wanted, in checking the first movements of our criminal desires. Every one must see and feel, that bad thoughts quickly ripen into bad actions; and that if the latter only are forbidden, and the former left free, all morality will soon be at an end. Our Lord, therefore, like a wise physician, goes at once to the bottom of the evil; he extirpates the first germ and root of the disease, and leaves not a single fibre of it remaining to shoot up again in the heart.

It was obvious to foresee that the disciples, and the people to whom our Saviour addressed himself, would consider this as very severe discipline, and would complain bitterly, or at least murmur secretly, at the hardships of parting with all their favourite passions, of eradicating their strongest natural propensities, of watching

watching constantly every motion of their hearts, and guarding those issues of life and death, those fountains of virtue and of vice, with the most unremitting attention. But all this our divine Master tells them is indispensably necessary. All these cautions must be used, all this vigilance must be exercised, all this self-government must be exerted, all these sacrifices must be made. It is the price we are to pay (besides that price which our Redeemer paid); and surely no unreasonable one, for escaping eternal misery, and rendering ourselves capable of eternal glory. He therefore goes on to say, in terms highly figurative and alarming, but not too strong for the occasion, "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that *one* of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell*." Every one must immediately see that the eye to be

* Matth. v. 29, 30.

plucked

plucked out is the eye of concupiscence, and the hand to be cut off is the hand of violence and vengeance; that is, these passions are to be checked and subdued, let the conflict cost us what it may.

This naturally leads our divine Teacher, in the next verse, to a subject closely connected with one of our strongest passions, and that is, the power of divorce. Among the Jews and the Heathens, but more particularly the latter, this power was carried to a great extent, and exercised with the most capricious and wanton cruelty. The best and most affectionate of wives were often dismissed for the slightest reasons, and sometimes without any reason at all. It was high time for some stop to be put to these increasing barbarities, and it was a task worthy of the Son of God himself to stand up as the defender and protector of the weak, of the most helpless and most oppressed part of the human species. Accordingly he here declares, in the most positive terms, that the only legitimate cause of divorce is adultery. "It has been said, whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement. But I say unto you, whosoever

whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery; and whosoever marrieth her that is divorced, committeth adultery*. This has, by the experience of ages, been found to be a most wise and salutary provision, and no less conducive to the happiness than to the virtue of mankind. And we are taught by the fatal example of other nations, that wherever this law of the Gospel has been abrogated or relaxed, and a greater facility of divorce allowed, the consequence has constantly been a too visible depravation of manners, and the destruction of many of the most essential comforts of the married state.

The passage to which I shall next advert is the following: "Ye have heard it has been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But *I* say unto you, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat,

* Matth. v. 31, 32.

let him have thy cloak also; and whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain*."

By the Mosaic law, retaliation was permitted; an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, might *legally* be demanded†. Among the ancient heathens, private revenge was indulged without scruple and without mercy. The savage nations in America, as well as in almost every other part of the world, set no bounds to the persevering rancour, and the cool deliberate malignity, with which they will pursue, for years together, not only the person himself from whom they have received an injury, but sometimes every one related to or connected with him. The Arabs are equally implacable in their resentments; and the Koran itself, in the case of murder, allows private revenge‡.

It was to check this furious ungovernable passion, so universally prevalent over

* Matth. v. 38—41.
† Levit. xxiv. 20. Deut. xix. 21.
‡ Koran, v. 2. c. 17. p. 100.

the

the earth, that our Saviour delivers the precepts now before us. "I say unto you resist not evil; but if any one smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." No one can imagine that this injunction, and those of the same kind that follow, are to be understood strictly and literally; that we are to submit, without the least opposition, to every injury and every insult that is offered to us, and are absolutely precluded from every degree of self-preservation and self-defence. This can never be intended; and the example of St. Paul, who repelled with proper spirit the insult offered him as a Roman citizen, very clearly proves that we are not to permit ourselves to be trampled on by the foot of pride and oppression, without expressing a just sense of the injury done to us, and endeavouring to avert and repel it. It cannot therefore be meant, that if any one, by a cruel and expensive litigation, should deprive us of a part of our property, we should not only relinquish to him that part, but request him also to accept every thing

else we have in the world. Nor can it be meant, that if a man should actually strike us on one cheek, we should immediately turn to him the other, and desire the blow to be repeated. This could not possibly answer any one rational purpose, nor conduce in the least to the peace and happiness of mankind, which were certainly the objects our Saviour had in view; on the contrary, it would tend materially to obstruct both by inviting injury, and encouraging insult and oppression. Common sense therefore, as well as common utility, require that we should consider the particular instances of behaviour under the injuries here specified, as nothing more than strong oriental idioms, as proverbial and figurative expressions, intended only to convey a general precept, and to describe that peculiar *temper* and *disposition* which the Gospel requires; that patience, gentleness, mildness, moderation, and forbearance, under injuries and affronts, which is best calculated to preserve the peace of our own minds, as well as that of the world at large; which tends to soften resentment

resentment and turn away wrath; and without which, on one side or the other, provocations must be endless, and enmities eternal.

All therefore that is here required of us is plainly and simply this, that we should not suffer our resentment of injuries to carry us beyond the bounds of justice, equity, and Christian charity; that we should not (as St. Paul well explains this passage) *recompense evil for evil**, that is, repay one injury by committing another; that we should not take fire at every slight provocation or trivial offence, nor pursue even the greatest and most flagrant injuries with implacable fury and inextinguishable rancour: that we should make all reasonable allowances for the infirmities of human nature, for the passions, the prejudices, the failings, the misapprehensions, of those we have to deal with; and without submitting tamely to oppression or insult, or giving up rights of *great and acknowledged importance*, should always show a disposition to conciliate and forgive; and rather to recede and give way a little in certain in-

* Rom. xii. 17.

stances, than insist on the *utmost* satisfaction and reparation that we have perhaps a strict right to demand.

The chapter concludes with another remarkable precept, which may strictly be called a *new* commandment; for in no moral code is it to be found, till our Lord gave it a place in his.

The precept is this: "Ye have heard it has been said, thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But *I* say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust*."

So noble, so sublime, and so benevolent a precept, was never before given to man; and it is one strong proof, among many others, of the originality of our Saviour's character and religion.

The Jews were expressly commanded to love their neighbour; but this injunction was not extended to their enemies, and they

* Matth. v. 43—45.

therefore

therefore thought that this was a tacit permission to *hate* them; a conclusion which seemed to be much strengthened by their being enjoined to wage eternal war with one of their enemies, the Canaanites, to show them no mercy, but to root them out of the land. In consequence of this, they *did* entertain strong prejudices and malignant sentiments toward every other nation but their own, and were justly reproached for this by the Roman historian; "apud ipsos misericordia in promptu, adversus omnes alios hostile odium*:" that is, towards each other they are compassionate and kind; towards all others they cherish a deadly hatred. But it ought in justice to be observed, that this remark of Tacitus might have been applied, with almost equal aptitude, both to his own countrymen the Romans, and to the Greeks, for they gave to all other nations but themselves the name of barbarians; and having stigmatized them with this opprobrious appellation, they treated them as if they were in reality what they had wantonly thought fit to call them. They treated them

* Tacit. Hist. v. 5.

with insolence, contempt, and cruelty. They created and carried on unceasing hostilities against them, and never sheathed the sword till they had exterminated or enslaved them.

In private life also, it was thought allowable to pursue those with whom they were at variance with the keenest resentment and most implacable hatred; to take every opportunity of annoying and distressing them, and not to rest till they had felt the severest effects of unrelenting vengeance.

In this situation of the world, and in this general ferment of the malevolent passions, how seasonable, how salutary, how kind, how conciliatory, was the command to love, not only our friends, not only our neighbours, not only strangers, but even our enemies! How gracious that injunction, "*I* say unto you, love your enemies; do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you!" And how touching, how irresistible, is the argument used to enforce it; "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for he maketh his sun to rise

rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust!"

It is remarkable, that the philosopher Seneca makes use of the same argument, not exactly for the same purpose, but for a similar one. "If (says he) you would imitate the gods, confer favours even on the ungrateful, for the sun rises on the wicked, and the seas are open even unto pirates:" and again, "the gods show many acts of kindness even to the ungrateful*." It is highly probable that the philosopher took this sentiment from this very passage of St. Matthew; for no such sublime morality is, I believe, to be found in any heathen writer *previous* to the Christian revelation.

Seneca flourished and wrote after the Gospels were written, and after Christianity had made some progress. Besides this, he was brother to Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, before whose tribual St. Paul was brought by the Jews at Corinth†. From him he would of course receive much information respecting this new religion, and the principal

* Sen. de. Benef. lib. 4. c. 26. and c. 28.

† Acts xviii. 12.

characters

characters concerned in it; and from the extraordinary things he would hear of it from such authentic sources, his curiosity would naturally be excited to look a little further into it, and to peruse the writings that contained the history and the doctrines of this new school of philosophy. This, and this only, can account for the fine strains of morality we sometimes meet with in Seneca, Plutarch, Marcus Antoninus, Epictetus, and the other philosophers who wrote after the Christian æra, and the visible superiority of *their* ethics to those of their predecessors before that period. But to return.

It has been objected to this command of *loving our enemies*, that it is extravagant and impracticable; that it is impossible for any man to bring himself to entertain any real love for his enemies; and that human nature revolts and recoils against so unreasonable a requisition.

This objection evidently goes upon the supposition that we are to love our enemies in the same manner and degree, and with the same cordiality and ardour of affection, that we do our relations and friends. And if this were

required,

required, it might indeed be considered as a harsh injunction. But our Lord was not so severe a task-master as to expect this at our hands. There are different degrees of love as well as of every other human affection; and these degrees are to be duly proportioned to the different objects of our regard. There is one degree due to our relations, another to our benefactors, another to our friends, another to strangers, another to our enemies. There is no need to define the precise shades and limits of each, our own feelings will save us that trouble; and in that only case where our feelings are likely to lead us wrong, this precept of our Lord will direct us right.

And it exacts nothing but what is both reasonable and practicable. It explains what is meant by *loving* our enemies in the words that immediately follow; "Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you:" that is, do not *retaliate* upon your enemy; do not return his execrations, his injuries, and his persecutions, with similar treatment; do not turn upon him his own weapons, but endeavour to subdue him with weapons

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of a celestial temper, with kindness and compassion. This is of all others the most effectual way of vanquishing an enraged adversary. The interpretation here given is amply confirmed by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, which is an admirable comment on this passage. "Dearly beloved, says he, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good*." This then is the *love* that we are to show our enemies; not that ardour of affection which we feel towards our friends, but that lower kind of *love*, which is called Christian charity (for it is the same word in the original) and which we ought to exercise toward every human being, especially in distress. If even our enemy hunger, we are to feed him; if he thirst, we are to give him drink; and thus shall obtain the noblest of all triumphs, "we shall overcome evil with good." The world if they please may call this meanness of spirit; but it is in fact the truest mag-

* Rom. xii. 19—21.

nanimity

nanimity and elevation of soul. It is far more glorious and more difficult to subdue our own resentments, and to act with generosity and kindness to our adversary, than to make him feel the severest effects of our vengeance. It is this noblest act of self-government, this conquest over our strongest passions, which our Saviour here requires. It is what constitutes the highest perfection of our nature: and it is this *perfection* which is meant in the concluding verse of this chapter; "Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*;" that is, in your conduct towards your enemies approach as near as you are able to that perfection of mercy which your heavenly Father manifests towards *his* enemies, towards the evil and the unjust, on whom he maketh his sun to rise as well as on the righteous and the just. This sense of the word *perfect* is established beyond controversy by the parallel passage in St. Luke; where, instead of the terms made use of by St. Matthew, "Be ye therefore *perfect*, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,"

* Matth. v. 48.

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the evangelist expressly says, "Be ye therefore *merciful*, as your Father also is merciful*."

This then is the perfection which you are to exert your utmost efforts to attain: and if you succeed in your attempt, your reward shall be great indeed; you shall, as our Lord assures you, be the *children of the Most High*†.

HAVING now brought these Lectures to a conclusion for the present year, I cannot take my leave of you without expressing the great comfort and satisfaction I have derived from the appearance of such numerous and attentive congregations as I have seen in this place. That satisfaction, if I can at all judge of my own sentiments and feelings, does not originate from any selfish gratification, but from the real interest I take in the welfare, the eternal welfare, of every one here present; from the hope I entertain that some useful impressions may have been made upon your minds; and from the evidence which this general earnestness to hear the word of God explained and recommended affords, that a deeper sense of duty, a more serious attention

* Luke vi. 36. † Matth. v. 45.

to

to the great concerns of eternity, has, by the blessing of God, been awakened in your souls. If this be so, allow me most earnestly to entreat you not to let this ardour cool; not to let these pious sentiments die away; not to let these good seeds be choked by the returning cares and pleasures of the world. But go, retire into your closets, fall down upon your knees before your Maker, and fervently implore him to pour down upon you the over-ruling influences of his Holy Spirit; to enlighten your understandings, to sanctify your hearts, to subdue your passions, to confirm your good resolutions, and enable you to resist every enemy of your salvation.

The world will soon again display all its attractions before you, and endeavour to extinguish every good principle you have imbibed. But if the divine truths you have heard explained and enforced in these Lectures have taken any firm root in your minds; if you are seriously convinced that Christ and his religion came from heaven, and that he is able to make good whatever he has promised and whatever he has threatened, there is nothing surely in this world that can induce you to

risque

risque the loss of eternal happiness, or the infliction of never-ceasing punishment.

Least of all will you think that this is the precise moment for setting your affections on this world and its enjoyments; that these are the times for engaging in eager pursuits after the advantages, the honours, the pleasures, of the present life; for plunging into vice, for dissolving in gaiety and pleasure, for suffering every trivial, every insignificant object, to banish the remembrance of your Maker and Redeemer from your hearts, where they ought to reign unrivalled and supreme. Surely amidst the dark clouds that now hang over us *, these are *not* the things that will brighten up our prospects, that will lessen our danger, that will calm our apprehensions, and speak peace and comfort to our souls. No, it must be something of a very different nature; a deep sense of our own unworthiness, a sincere contrition for our past offences, a prostration of ourselves in all humility before the throne of Grace, an earnest application for pardon and acceptance through the merits of him who died for us (whose death

* In March 1798.

and

and sufferings for our sakes the approaching week will bring fresh before our view), an ardent desire to manifest our love and gratitude, our devotion and attachment to our Maker and our Redeemer, by giving them a decided priority and predominance in our affections and our hearts; by making their will the ruling principle of our conduct; the attainment of their favour, the advancement of their glory, the chief object of our wishes and desires. These are the sentiments we ought to cultivate and cherish if we wish for any solid comfort under calamity or affliction, any confidence in the favour and protection of Heaven; these alone can support and sustain our souls in the midst of danger and distress, at the hour of death, and in the day of judgment.

And how then are these holy sentiments, these heavenly affections to be excited in our hearts? Most certainly not by giving up all our time and all our thoughts to the endless occupations, the never-ceasing gaieties and amusements of this dissipated metropolis; but by withdrawing ourselves frequently from this tumultuous scene, by retiring into our cham-

ber, by communing with our own hearts, by fervent prayer, by holding high converse with our Maker, and cultivating some acquaintance with that unseen world to which we are all hastening, and which, in one way or other, must be our portion for ever.

Many of those whom I now see before me have, from their high rank and situation in life, full leisure and ample opportunities for all these important purposes; and let them be assured, that a strict account will one day be demanded of them in what manner and with what effect they have employed the talents, the time, and the many other advantages with which their gracious Maker has indulged them.

And even those who are most engaged in the busy and laborious scenes of life, have at least *one* day in the week which they may, and which they ought to dedicate to the great concerns of religion. Let then *that* day be kept sacred to its original destination by all ranks of men, from the highest to the lowest. Let it not be profaned by needless journies, by splendid entertainments, by crowded assemblies,

semblies, by any thing in short which precludes either ourselves, our families, or our domestics, from the exercise of religious duties, or the improvement of those pious sentiments and affections which it was meant to inspire. Let me not, however, be misunderstood. I mean not that it should be either to the rich or the poor, or to any human being whatever, a day of gloom and melancholy, a day of superstitious rigour, and of absolute exclusion from all society and all innocent recreation. I know of nothing in Scripture that requires this; I know of no good effects that could result from it. On the contrary, it is a festival, a *joyful* festival; a day to which we ought always to look forward with delight, and enjoy with a thankful and a grateful heart. But let it be remembered at the same time, that it is a day which God claims as *his own*; that he has stamped upon it a peculiar mark of sanctity; and that it ought to be distinguished from every other day, in the first place, by resting from our usual occupations, and giving rest to our servants and our cattle; in the next, by attendance on the public worship of God; and in the remaining intervals, by relaxations and

enjoyments *peculiarly its own*; not by quotidian tumult, noise, and dissipation; but by the calm and silent pleasures of retirement, of recollection, of devout meditation, of secret prayer, yet mingled discreetly with select society, with friendly converse, with sober recreation, and with decent cheerfulness throughout the whole.

It was to draw off our attention from the common follies and vanities of the week, and to give the soul a little pause, a little respite, a little breathing from the incessant importunities of business and of pleasure, that this holy festival was instituted. And if we cannot give up these things for a *single* day, if we cannot make this small sacrifice to Him from whom we derive our very existence, it is high time for us to look to our hearts, and to consider very seriously whether such a disposition and temper of mind as this will ever qualify us for the kingdom of heaven.

"Could ye not watch with me *one* hour?" said our divine Master to his slumbering companions*. Can ye not give me *one* day out of seven? may he now say to his thoughtless dis-

* Mark xiv. 37.

ciples.

ciples. Let none of us then ever subject ourselves to this bitter reproach. Let us resolve from this moment to make the Christian sabbath a day of holy joy and consolation; a day of heavenly rest and refreshment; and above all, a day for the attentive perusal of those sacred pages which have been the subject of these Lectures, and of your most serious attention. It is to be hoped, indeed, that we shall not confine our religion and our devotion to that day only; but even *that* day properly employed, will in some degree sanctify all the rest. It will disengage us (as it was meant to do) gradually and gently from that world, which we must soon (perhaps sooner than we imagine) quit for ever; it will raise our thoughts above the low and trivial pursuits of the present scene, and fix them on nobler and worthier objects; it will refine and purify, exalt and spiritu lize our affections; will bring us nearer and nearer to God, and to the world of spirits; and thus lead us on to that CELESTIAL SABBATH, that EVERLASTING REST, for which the Christian sabbath was meant to prepare and harmonize our souls.

LECTURE VII.

MATTH. CHAP. vi. and vii.

IN these two chapters our Lord continues and concludes his admirable discourse from the Mount.

The first thing to be noticed here is a strong and repeated caution to avoid all show and ostentation in the performance of our religious duties.

The three instances specified are the acts of giving alms, of praying, and of fasting.

The direction with regard to the first is, "Take heed that you do not your alms before men, to be seen of them, otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thy alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men; verily I

say unto you, they have their reward. But when *thou* doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, that thine alms may be in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly*."

In the same manner with regard to prayer; the rule is, "When thou prayest thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men; verily I say unto you they have their reward. But thou, when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly†."

Lastly, a similar precaution applies also to the act of fasting; "When ye fast, be not as the hypocrites of a sad countenance, for they disfigure their faces that they may appear unto men to fast; verily I say unto you they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto

* Matth. vi. 1—4. † Ibid. 5—6.

thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly*."

In all these passages the point to be noticed is a strong and marked disapprobation of every thing that looks like ostentation, parade, vain-glory, insincerity, or hypocrisy, in the discharge of our Christian duties. They show in the clearest light the spirit and temper of the Christian religion, which is modest, silent, retired, quiet, unobtrusive, shunning the observation and the applause of men, and looking only to the approbation of him who seeth every thought of our hearts, and every secret motive of our actions.

They establish this as the grand principle of action for every disciple of Christ, that in every part of his moral and religious conduct he is to have no other object in view but *the favour of God.* This is the motive from which all his virtues are to flow. If he is actuated by any other: if he courts the applause of the world, or is ambitious to acquire, by a show of piety, a character of sanctity among men, he may perhaps gain his point; but it is

* Matth. vi. 16—18.

all

all he will gain. He will have his reward here; he must expect none hereafter.

Having made this general observation upon the whole, I shall now proceed to remark on the particular instances adduced, in order to establish the leading principle.

And first, we are directed to give our alms so privately, that (as our Lord most emphatically and elegantly expresses it) "our left hand shall not know what our right hand doeth." This evidently implies the utmost secresy in the distribution of our charity; and this is undoubtedly the rule we are in general to observe. But it is by no means to be inferred from hence that we are never, on any occasion, to give our alms in public. In some cases, publicity is so far from being culpable, that it is necessary, useful, and laudable. In contributing, for instance, to any public charity, or to the relief of some great calamity, private or public, we cannot well conceal our beneficence, or if we could we ought not. Our example may induce many others to exert a similar generosity; and besides this there are persons in certain situations who are expected to be charitable, and who should give proofs to the

the world that they are so. And accordingly in these and in such like cases we are required to make our "light so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven *." As far therefore as the *reason* of this command goes, it is not only allowable, but our duty, to let our generous deeds be *sometimes* known to the world. But then we ought to take especial care at the same time that we bestow a much *larger* proportion of our alms in secresy and in silence; that we suffer no one to witness our beneficence but Him who *must* see every thing we do, and that we have no other object whatever in view but his approbation, and his immortal rewards.

The next instance adduced to confirm the general principle of seeking the approbation not of men but of God, is that of prayer.

"When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are, for *they* love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men; verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou when thou prayest, enter into thy

* Matth. v. 16.

closet,

closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

This passage has been made use of by some writers as an argument against all *public* prayer, which they say is here plainly prohibited. But for this there is not the smallest foundation. It is of *private* prayer only that our Lord is here speaking; and the hypocrites whom he condemns were those ostentatious Jews who performed those devotions which ought to have been confined to the closet, in the synagogues, and even in the public streets, that they might be noticed and applauded for their extraordinary piety and sanctity. But this reproof could not possibly mean to extend to *public* devotions in places of worship. This is evident from the *corners of streets* being mentioned; for those are places in which public devotions are never performed. But besides this, we find in Scripture that public worship is enjoined as a duty of the highest importance. It made a considerable part of the Jewish religion, and the Mosaic law is filled with precepts and directions concerning it. God declares by the prophet

prophet Isaiah, "that his house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* people*." Our Saviour quotes these very words when he cast out those that polluted the temple; and was himself a constant frequenter of divine worship, both in the temple and in the synagogues. He taught his disciples (as we shall soon see) a form of prayer, which though very proper to be used by any single person in private, yet is throughout expressed in the plural number, and adapted to the use of several persons praying at the same time. "If two of you," says he to his disciples on another occasion, "shall agree on earth touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven; for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them†." By St. Paul we are commanded "not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is‡." And we find, that after our Saviour's ascension, his followers "continued stedfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, and in prayer and supplication, praising God, and having favour with all the people§."

* Isaiah lvi. 7.
† Matth. xviii. 19—20.
‡ Heb. x. 25.
§ Acts ii. 42, 47.

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It is therefore incontestably clear that our Saviour could not possibly mean to forbid that public worship which he himself practised and commanded. His intentions could only be to confine our private prayers to private places, in which we are to keep up a secret intercourse with our Maker, withdrawn from the eye of the world, and unobserved by any other than that Almighty Being to whom our petitions are addressed.

The last instance produced by our Saviour is that of fasting. "When ye fast, be not as the hypocrites of a sad countenance, for they disfigure their faces that they may appear unto men to fast; verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

There is very little necessity to dwell on this precept here, for there are scarce any in these times and in this country who seem disposed to make a *show* of fasting, or to be ambitious of requiring a reputation for that kind of religious discipline; on the contrary,

it

it is by great numbers entirely laid aside, and too frequently treated with derision and contempt. Yet from this very passage we may learn that it ought to be considered in a much more serious light; for although our Saviour did not command his disciples to fast whilst he was with them, yet he himself fasted for forty days. He here plainly supposes that his disciples did sometimes fast; and gives them directions how to perform that duty in a manner acceptable to God. And it appears also, that if they did so perform it, if they fasted without any ostentation or parade, with a design not to catch the applause of men, but to approve themselves to God, he assured them *they should have their reward.*

Before we quit this division of the chapter, we must go back a little to that admirable form of prayer which our Lord gave to his disciples, after cautioning them against all ostentation in their devotions.

This prayer stands unrivalled in every circumstance that constitutes the perfection of prayer, and the excellence of that species of composition. It is concise, it is perspicuous, it is solemn, it is comprehensive, it is adapted

to

to all ranks, conditions, and classes of men; it fixes our thoughts on a few great important points, and impresses on our minds a deep sense of the goodness and the greatness of that Almighty Being to whom it is addressed.

It begins with acknowledging him to be our most gracious and merciful Father; it begs that his name may every where be reverenced, that his religion may spread over the earth, and that his will may be obeyed by men with the same ardour and alacrity and constancy that it is by the angels in heaven. It next entreats the supply of all our essential wants, both temporal and spiritual; a sufficiency of those things that are absolutely necessary for our subsistence; the forgiveness of our transgressions, on condition that we forgive our brethren; and, finally, support under the temptations that assault our virtue, and deliverance from the various evils and calamities that every where surround us; expressing at the same time the utmost trust and confidence in the power of God, to grant whatever he sees it expedient and proper for his creatures to receive.

The full meaning then of this admirable prayer, and of the several petitions contained in it, may perhaps be not improperly expressed in the following manner:

O thou great Parent of the universe, our Creator, our Preserver and continual Benefactor, grant that we and all reasonable creatures may entertain just and worthy notions of thy nature and attributes, may fear thy power, admire thy wisdom, adore thy goodness, rely upon thy truth; may reverence thy holy name, may bless and praise thee, may worship and obey thee.

Grant that all the nations of the earth may come to the knowledge and belief of thy holy religion; that it may every where produce the blessed fruits of piety, righteousness, charity, and sobriety; that by a constant endeavour to obey thy holy laws, we may approach, as near as the infirmity of our nature will allow, to the more perfect obedience of the angels that are in heaven; and thus qualify ourselves for entering into thy kingdom of glory hereafter.

Feed us, we beseech thee, with food convenient for us. We ask not for riches and honours;

hours; give us only what is necessary for our comfortable subsistence in the several stations which thy providence has allotted to us; and above all, give us contented minds.

We are all, O Lord, the very best of us, miserable sinners. Be not extreme, we beseech thee, to mark what we have done amiss, but pity our infirmities, and pardon our offences. Yet let us not dare to implore forgiveness from thee, unless we also from our hearts forgive our offending brethren.

We are surrounded, on every side, with temptations to sin; and such is the corruption and frailty of our nature, that without thy powerful succour we cannot always stand upright. Take us then, O gracious God, under thy Almighty protection; and amidst all the dangers and difficulties of our Christian warfare, be thou our refuge and support. Suffer us not to be tempted above what we are able to bear, but send thy holy spirit to strengthen our own weak endeavours, and enable us to escape or to subdue all the enemies of our salvation.

Preserve us also, if it be thy blessed will,

not only from spiritual, but from temporal evil. Keep us ever by thy watchful providence, both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that, thou being in all cases our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal as finally to lose not the things eternal.

Hear us, O Lord our governor, from heaven thy dwelling place; and when thou hearest, have regard to our petitions. They are offered up to thee in the fullest confidence that thy goodness will dispose and thy power enable thee to grant whatever thy wisdom sees to be convenient for us, and conducive to our final happiness.

The next thing which peculiarly demands our attention in this chapter is the declaration contained in the 24th verse, which presents to us another fundamental principle of the Christian religion; namely, the necessity of giving the *first* place in our hearts and our affections to God and religion, and pursuing other things only in subordination to those great objects. "No man," says our Lord, "can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and

love

love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon*."

The word mammon is generally interpreted to mean *riches* only; but the original rather directs us to take it in a more general sense, as comprehending every thing that is capable of being an object of *trust* or a ground of *confidence* to men of worldly minds; such as wealth, power, honour, fame, business, sensual pleasures, gay amusements, and all the other various pursuits of the present scene. It is these that constitute what we usually express by the word *world*, when opposed to religion. Here then are the two masters who claim dominion over us, God and the world; and one of these we *must* serve; both we cannot, because their dispositions and their commands are in general diametrically opposite to each other. The world invites us to indulge all our appetites without control; to entangle ourselves in the cares and distractions of business; to engage with eagerness in endless contests for superiority in power, wealth, and honour; or to give up ourselves, body and soul, to gaiety,

* Matth. vi. 24.

amusement, pleasure, and every kind of luxurious indulgence. These are the services which *one* master requires. But there is another master, whose injunctions are of a very different nature. That master is GOD; and *his* commands are, to give him our hearts; to love him with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength; to be temperate in all things; to make our moderation known unto all men; to fix our affections on things above; to have our conversation in heaven; to cast all our care upon him; and to take up our cross and follow Christ.

Judge now whether it be possible to serve these two masters at one and the same time, and to obey the commands of each; commands so perfectly contradictory to each other.

Yet this is what a great part of mankind most absurdly attempt; endeavour to divide themselves between God and mammon, to compromise the matter as well as they can between the commands of one and the seductions of the other; to vibrate perpetually between vice and virtue, between piety and pleasure, between inclination and duty; to render

a worldly life and a religious life consistent with each other; and to take as much as they can of the enjoyments and advantages of the present world, without losing their hold on the rewards of the next.

Yet, in direct contradiction to so extravagant and preposterous a system as this, Christ himself assures us here that we cannot serve two masters; that we cannot serve God and mammon. Our Maker expects to reign absolute in our hearts; he will not be served by halves; he will not accept of a divided empire; he will not suffer us to halt between two opinions. We must take our choice, and adhere to one side or the other. "If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him*."

But what then are we to do? Are we to live in a state of perpetual warfare and hostility with that very world in which the hand of Providence has placed us, and which is prepared in various ways for our reception and accommodation? Are we never to taste of those various delights which our Maker has poured so bountifully around us? Are we never to indulge those appetites which he himself has

* 1 Kings, xviii. 21.

planted in our breasts? Are we so entirely to confine ourselves to the paths of righteousness, as never to enter those that lead to power, to honour, to wealth, or to fame? Are we to engage in no secular occupations, to make no provision for ourselves and our families? Are we altogether to withdraw ourselves from the cares and business and distractions of the world, and give ourselves wholly up to solitude, meditation, and prayer? Are we never to mingle in the chearful amusements of society? Are we not to indulge ourselves in the refined pleasures of literary pursuits, nor wander even for a moment into the delightful regions of science or imagination?

Were this a true picture of our duties, and of the sacrifices which Christianity requires from us; were these the commands of our divine Lawgiver, well might we say with the astonished disciples, "who then can be saved?"

But the God whom we serve is not so hard a master, nor does his religion contain any such severe restrictions as these. Christianity forbids no necessary occupations, no reasonable indulgences, no innocent relaxations. It allows us to use the world, provided we do not

abuse

abuse it. It does not spread before us a delicious banquet, and then come with a "touch not, taste not, handle not*." All it requires is, that our liberty degenerate not into licentiousness, our amusements into dissipation, our industry into incessant toil, our carefulness into extreme anxiety and endless solicitude. So far from forbidding us to engage in business, it expressly commands us not to be slothful in it†, and to labour with our hands for the things that be needful; it enjoins every one to abide in the calling wherein he was called‡, and perform all the duties of it. It even stigmatizes those that provide not for their own, with telling them that they are worse than infidels§. When it requires us "to be temperate‖ in all things," it plainly tells us that we *may* use *all* things temperately; when it directs us "to make our moderation known unto all men¶." This evidently implies that within the bounds of moderation we may enjoy all the reasonable conveniencies and comforts of the present life.

* Coloss. ii. 21.
† Rom. xii. 11. 1 Cor. iv. 12.
‡ 1 Cor. vii. 20.
§ 1 Tim. v. 8.
‖ 1 Cor. ix. 25.
¶ Philipp. iv. 5.

But how then are we to reconcile this participation in the concerns of the present life, with those very strong declarations of Scripture, "that we are not to be conformed to this world; that the friendship of the world is enmity with God; that we are to take *no thought* for the morrow; that we are to lay up treasures no where but in heaven; that we are to pray without ceasing; that we are to do *all* things to the glory of God; that we are not only to leave father, mother, brethren, and sisters, for the sake of Christ and his Gospel, but that if we do not *hate* all these near and dear connections, and even our own lives, we cannot be his disciples*."

These, it must be acknowledged, are very strong expressions, and taken, in their strict literal sense, do certainly imply that we are to abandon every thing that is most dear and valuable and delightful to us in this life, and to devote ourselves so entirely to the contemplation and love and worship of God, as not

* Rom. xii. 2. Jam. iv. 4. Matth. vi. 20. 34. 1 Thess. v. 17. Ephes. vi. 18. 1 Cor. x. 31. Luke, xiv. 26.

to

to bestow a single thought on any thing else, or to give ourselves the smallest concern about the affairs of this sublunary state.

But can any one imagine this to be the *real* doctrine of Scripture? You may rest assured that nothing so unreasonable and extravagant is to be fairly deduced from these sacred writings.

In order then to clear up this most important point, three things are to be considered:

First, that were these injunctions to be understood in their literal signification, it would be utterly impossible for us to continue a week longer in the world. If for instance we were bound to pray without ceasing, and to take no thought whatever for the morrow, we must all of us quickly perish for want of the common necessaries of life.

2dly, It must be observed that all oriental writers, both sacred and profane, are accustomed to express themselves in bold ardent figures and metaphors, which, before their true meaning can be ascertained, require very considerable abatements, restrictions, and limitations.

3dly,

3dly, What is most of all to the purpose, these abatements are almost constantly pointed out by Scripture itself; and whenever a very strong and forcible idiom is made use of, you will generally find it explained and modified by a different expression of the same sentiment, which either immediately follows, or occurs in some other passage of Scripture.

Thus in the present instance, when Christ says, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon; therefore take no thought for your life what ye shall eat and what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body what ye shall put on:" this is most clearly explained a few verses after in these words, "Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you*." The meaning therefore of the precept is evidently this; not that we are absolutely to take no thought for our life, and the means of supporting it; but that our thoughts are not to be *wholly* or *principally* occupied with these things. We are not to indulge an immoderate and unceasing anxiety and solicitude about them: for that indeed is

* Matth. vi. 25. 33.

the

the true meaning of the original word μεριμναω. In our English Bible that word is translated *take no thought*; but at the time when our translation was made, that expression signified only *be not too careful*. Our hearts, as it is expressed in another place, are not to be *overcharged* with the cares of this life*, so as to exclude all other concerns, even those of religion.

In the same manner with respect to pleasures, we are not forbid to have *any* love for them; we are only commanded not to be lovers of pleasure *more* than lovers of God†.

When therefore it is said, ye cannot serve God and mammon, the point contended for in respect to God is not exclusive *possession*, but exclusive *dominion*. Other things may occasionally for a certain time, and to a certain degree, have possession of our minds, but they must not *rule*, they must not *reign* over them. We cannot serve two masters; we can serve but one faithfully and effectually, and that one must be God. The concerns and comforts of this life may have their *due* place

* Luke, xxi. 34. † 2 Tim. iii. 4.

in

in our hearts, but they must not aspire to the *first*; this is the prerogative of religion alone; religion must be supreme and paramount over all. Every one, it has been often said, has his ruling passion. The ruling passion of the Christian must be the love of his Maker and Redeemer. This it is which must *principally* occupy his thoughts, his time, his attention, his heart. If there be any thing else which has gained the ascendency over our souls, on which our desires, our wishes, our hopes, our fears, are *chiefly* fixed, God is then dispossessed of his rightful dominion over us; we serve another master, and we shall think but little of our Maker, or any thing belonging to him.

His empire over our hearts must in short at all events be maintained. When this point is once secured, every inferior gratification that is consistent with his sovereignty, his glory, and his commands, is perfectly allowable; every thing that is hostile to them must at once be renounced.

This is a plain rule, and a very important one. It is the principle which our blessed Lord

Lord meant here to establish, and it must be the governing principle of our lives.

Next to this in importance is another command, which you will find in the 12th verse of the seventh chapter; "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." As the former precepts which we have been considering relate to God, this relates to man; it is the grand rule, by which we must in all cases regulate our conduct towards our neighbour; and it is a rule, plain, simple, concise, intelligible, comprehensive, and every way worthy of its divine Author. Whenever we are deliberating how we ought to act towards our neighbour in any particular instance, we must for a moment change situations with him in our own minds, we must place him in our circumstances and ourselves in his, and then whatever we should wish him to do to us, *that* we are to do to him. This is a process, in which, if we act fairly and impartially, we can never be mistaken. Our own feelings will determine our conduct at once better than all the casuists in the world.

But

But before we entirely quit the consideration of this precept, we must take some notice of the observation subjoined to it, which will require a little explanation.

"Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets."

The concluding clause, *this is the law and the prophets*, has by some been interpreted to mean, this is the sum and substance of all religion; as if religion consisted solely in behaving justly and kindly to our fellow creatures, and beyond this no other duty was required at our hands. But this conclusion is as groundless as it is dangerous and unscriptural.

There are duties surely of another order, equally necessary at least, and equally important with those we owe to our neighbour.

There are duties, in the first place, owing to our Creator, whom we are bound to honour, to venerate, to worship, to obey, and to love with all our hearts and souls, and mind, and strength. There are duties owing to our Redeemer, of affection, attachment, gratitude, faith

faith in his divine mission, and reliance on the atonement he made for us on the cross. There are, lastly, acts of discipline, and self-government to be exercised over our corrupt propensities and irregular desires. Accordingly, in the very chapter we have just been considering, we are commanded to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We are in another place informed, that the love of God is the first and great commandment, and the love of our neighbour only the second; and we are taught by St. James that one main branch of religion is to keep ourselves unspotted from the world*. It is impossible therefore that our blessed Lord could here mean to say, that our duty towards our neighbour was the whole of his religion; he says nothing in fact of *his* religion; he speaks only of the Jewish religion, *the law and the prophets*; and of these he only says that one of the great objects they have in view is to inculcate that same equitable conduct towards our brethren which he here recommended†.

* James i. 27.

† See chap. xxii. 40. Rom. xiii. 8. Gal. v. 14. and Grotius on this verse.

Let

Let no one then indulge the vain imagination that a just, and generous, and compassionate conduct towards his fellow creatures constitutes the *whole* of his duty, and will compensate for the want of every other Christian virtue.

This is a most fatal delusion; and yet in the present times a very common one. Benevolence is the favourite, the fashionable virtue of the age; it is universally cried up by infidels and libertines as the first and only duty of man; and even many who pretend to the name of Christians, are too apt to rest upon it as the most essential part of their religion, and the chief basis of their title to the rewards of the Gospel. But that Gospel, as we have just seen, prescribes to us several other duties, which require from us the same attention as those we owe to our neighbour; and if we fail in any of them, we can have no hope of sharing in the benefits procured for us by the sacrifice of our Redeemer. What then God and nature, as well as Christ and his apostles, have joined together,

gether, let no man dare to put asunder. Let no one flatter himself with obtaining the rewards, or even escaping the punishments of the Gospel, by performing only one branch of his duty; nor let him ever suppose that under the shelter of benevolence he can either on the one hand evade the first and great command, the love of his Maker; or on the other hand that he can securely indulge his favourite passions, can compound as it were with God for his sensuality by acts of generosity, and purchase by his wealth a general licence to sin. This may be very good pagan morality, may be very good modern philosophy, but it is not Christian godliness.

As it is my purpose to touch only on the most important and most generally useful parts of our Saviour's discourse, I shall pass over what remains of it, and hasten to the conclusion, which is expressed by the sacred historian in these words: "And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine; for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes*." Both his

* Matth. vii. 28, 29.

matter and his manner were infinitely beyond any thing they had ever heard before. He did not, like the heathen philosophers, entertain his hearers with dry metaphysical discourses on the nature of the supreme good, and the several divisions and subdivisions of virtue; nor did he, like the Jewish rabbies, content himself with dealing out ceremonies and traditions, with discoursing on mint and cummin, and estimating the breadth of a phylactery; but he drew off their attention from these trivial and contemptible things to the greatest and the noblest objects; the existence of one supreme Almighty Being, the Creator, Preserver, and Governor of the universe: the first formation of man; his fall from original innocence; the consequent corruption and depravity of his nature; the remedy provided for him by the goodness of our Maker and the death of our Redeemer; the nature of that divine religion which he himself came to reveal to mankind; the purity of heart and sanctity of life which he required; the communications of God's Holy Spirit to assist our own feeble endeavours here, and a crown of immortal glory to recompense us hereafter.

The

The morality he taught was the purest, the soundest, the sublimest, the most perfect, that had ever before entered into the imagination, or proceeded from the lips of man. And this he delivered in a manner the most striking and impressive; in short, sententious, solemn, important, ponderous rules and maxims, or in familiar, natural, affecting similitudes and parables. He shewed also a most consummate knowledge of the human heart, and dragged to light all its artifices, subtleties, and evasions. He discovered every thought as it arose in the mind; he detected every irregular desire before it ripened into action. He manifested at the same time the most perfect impartiality. He had no respect of persons. He reproved vice in every station wherever he found it, with the same freedom and boldness; and he added to the whole the weight, the irresistible weight, of his own example. He and he only of all the sons of men, acted up in every the minutest instance to what he taught; and his life exhibited a perfect portrait of his religion. But what completed the whole was, that he taught, as the evangelist expresses it, *with authority*, with the authority of a divine

teacher. The ancient philosophers could do nothing more than give good advice to their followers; they had no means of enforcing that advice; but our great Lawgiver's precepts are all DIVINE COMMANDS. He spoke in the name of God: he called himself the Son of God. He spoke in a tone of superiority and authority, which no one before had the courage or the right to assume: and finally, he enforced every thing he taught by the most solemn and awful sanctions, by a promise of eternal felicity to those who obeyed him, and a denunciation of the most tremendous punishment to those who rejected him.

These were the circumstances which gave our blessed Lord the authority with which he spake. No wonder then that the people "were astonished at his doctrines; and that they all declared he spake as never man spake*."

* John, vii. 46.

LECTURE VIII.

MATTH. viii.

THE eighth chapter of St. Matthew, a part of which will be the subject of this Lecture, begins with the miraculous cure of the leper; which is related in the following manner:

"When our Lord was come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him, and behold there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth his hand and touched him, saying, I *will*; be thou clean: and immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus saith unto him, See thou tell no man; but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them."

The leprosy is a disorder of the most malignant and disgusting nature. It was once

common in Europe. Those infected with it were called Lazars, who were separated from all human society (the disease being highly contagious) and were confined in hospitals called Lazarettos, of which it is said there were no less than nine thousand at one time in Europe. For the last two hundred years this distemper has almost entirely vanished from this and other countries of Europe, and an instance of it now is but seldom to be met with. In the East it still exists to a certain degree; and there in former ages it had its source and origin, and raged for a great length of time with extraordinary violence.

In the law of Moses there are very particular directions given concerning the treatment of lepers, and a ceremonial appointed for the examination of them by the priest when they were supposed to be cured. But no *natural* remedy is prescribed by Moses for the cure of it. It was considered by the Jews as a disease sent by God, and to be cured only by his interposition. There could not therefore be a stronger proof of our Saviour's divine power, than his curing this most loathsome disease,

of

of which, many instances besides this occur in the Gospels. The manner too in which he performed this cure was equally an evidence that all the fulness of the Godhead dwelt in him*; it was instantaneous, with a touch, and a few words, and those words the most sublime and dignified that can be imagined: I WILL; BE THOU CLEAN: and immediately the leprosy departed from him. This was plainly the language as well as the act of a God. I WILL; BE THOU CLEAN.

Yet with all this supernatural power there was no ostentation or parade, no arrogant contempt of ancient ceremonies and institutions (which an enthusiast always tramples under foot); but on the contrary a perfect submission to the established laws and usages of his country. He said to the man who was healed, "See thou tell no man; but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them." Here he gave at once a striking example both of humility and obedience. He enjoined the man to keep secret the astonishing miracle he had wrought, and he com-

* Coloss. ii. 9.

manded him to comply with the injunctions of Moses; to shew himself to the priest, to undergo the examination, and to offer the sacrifice prescribed by the law*; which, at the same time that it shewed his disposition to fulfil all righteousness, established the truth of the miracle beyond all controversy, by making the priest himself the judge of the reality of the cure. This was not the mode which an impostor would have chosen.

After this miracle, the next incident that occurs is the remarkable and interesting story of the centurion, whose servant was cured of the palsy by our Saviour. The relation of this miracle is as follows: "When Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him and saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented†. And Jesus saith unto him,

* Lev. xiv.

† In the parallel passage of St. Luke, chap. vii. it is said, that the centurion sent messengers to Jesus: but no mention is made of his coming to him in person. This difficulty may be cleared up by observing, that in Scripture what any person does by his messengers he is frequently represented as doing by himself. Thus Christ, who preached to the Ephesians by his apostles, is said to have

 preached

him, I will come and heal him. The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me; and I say unto this man, go, and he goeth; and to another, come, and he cometh; and to a third, do this, and he doeth it. When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed him, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee: and his servant was healed in the self-same hour."

preached to them himself, Eph. ii. 17. But it seems to me not at all improbable, that the centurion may both have sent messengers to Jesus, and afterwards gone to him in person. "Not thinking himself worthy" (as he himself expresses it) to go to Christ in the first instance, he sent probably the elders of the Jews, and then some of his friends, to implore our Lord to heal his servant, not meaning to give him the trouble of coming to his house. But when he found that Jesus was actually on his way to him, what was more natural for him than to hasten out of his house to meet him, and to make his acknowledgments to him in person?

This

This is the short and edifying history of the Roman centurion; and the reason of its being recorded by the sacred writers was, in the first place, to give a most striking evidence of our Saviour's divine power, which enabled him to restore the centurion's servant to health *at a distance*, and without so much as seeing him; and in the next place to set before us, in the character of the centurion, an illustrious example of those eminent Christian virtues, humanity and charity, piety and generosity, humility and faith.

Of the former of these virtues, humanity and charity, he gave a very convincing proof in the solicitude he shewed for the welfare of his servant, and the strong interest he took in the recovery of his health. And this is the more remarkable and the more honourable to the centurion, because in general the treatment which the servants of the Romans experienced from their masters was very different indeed, from what we see in the present instance. These servants were almost all of them slaves, and were too commonly treated with extreme rigour and cruelty. They were often strained to labour beyond their strength,

strength, were confined to loathsome dungeons, were loaded with chains, were scourged and tortured without reason, were deserted in sickness and old age, and put to death for trivial faults and slight suspicions, and sometimes out of mere wantonness and cruelty, without any reason at all. Such barbarity as this, which was at that time by no means uncommon, which indeed has in a greater or less degree universally prevailed in every country where slavery has been established, and which shews in the strongest light the danger of trusting absolute power of any kind, political or personal, in the hands of such a creature as man; this barbarity, I say, forms a most striking contrast to the kindness and compassion of the centurion, who, though he had so much power over his slaves, and so many instances of its severest exertion before his eyes, yet made use of it as we here see, not for their oppression and destruction, but their happiness, comfort, and preservation.

The next virtues which attract our notice in the centurion's character are his piety and generosity. These were eminently displayed in the affection he manifested towards the Jewish

Jewish people, and his building them a place of worship at his own expence; for the elders of the Jews informed Jesus, "that he loved their nation, and had built them a synagogue*."

The Jews, it is well known, were at this time under the dominion of the Romans. Their country was a Roman province, where this centurion had a military command; and they who are acquainted with the Roman history know well with what cruelty, rapacity, and oppression, the governors, and commanding officers in the conquered provinces, too commonly behaved towards the people whom they were sent to keep in awe. So far were they from building them temples or synagogues, that they frequently invaded even those sacred retreats, and laid their sacrilegious hands on every thing that was valuable in them. Of this we have abundant proofs in the history of Verres, when governor of Sicily; and Verres was in many respects a faithful representative of too large a part of the Roman governors. In the midst of this brutality and insolence of power does this gallant soldier

* Luke, vii. 5.

stand

stand up to patronize and assist a distressed and an injured people; and it is a testimony as glorious to his memory as it is singular and almost unexampled in his circumstances, that he *loved the Jewish nation*, and that he gave a very decisive and magnificent proof of it, by building them a synagogue; for there cannot be a stronger indication both of love to mankind and love towards God, than erecting places of worship where they are wanted*. Without buildings to assemble in, there

* There is a most dreadful want of this nature in the western part of this great metropolis. From St. Martin's-in-the-Fields to Marybone church inclusive, a space containing perhaps 200,000 souls, there are only five parish churches, St. Martin's, St. Anne's Soho, St. James's, St. George's Hanover Square, and the very small church of Marybone. There are, it is true, a few chapels interspersed in this place; but what they can contain is a mere trifle, compared to the whole number of inhabitants in those parts, and the lowest classes are almost entirely excluded from them. The only measure that can be of any essential service, is the erection of several spacious parish churches, capable of receiving very large congregations, and affording decent accommodations for the lower and inferior, as well as the higher orders of the people. In the reign of Queen Anne, a considerable sum of money was voted by Parliament for fifty new churches. It is most devoutly to be wished, that

there can be no public worship. Without public worship there can be no religion; and what kind of creatures men become without religion; into what excesses of barbarity, ferocity, impiety, and every species of profligacy they quickly plunge, we have too plainly seen; God grant that we may never feel!

The next remarkable feature in the character of the centurion is his humility. How completely this most amiable of human virtues had taken possession of his soul, is evident from the *manner* in which he solicited our Saviour for the cure of his servant; how cautious, how modest, how diffident, how timid, how fearful of offending, even whilst he was only begging an act of kindness for another! Twice did he send messengers to our Lord, as

that the present Parliament would, to a certain extent at least, follow so honourable an example. It is, I am sure, in every point of view, political, moral, and religious, well worthy the attention of the British legislature. A sufficient number of new parish churches, erected both in the capital and in other parts of the kingdom where they are wanted, for the use of the members of the church of England of all conditions, would very essentially conduce to the interests of religion, and the security and welfare of the established Church.

as thinking himself unworthy to address him in his own person; and when at our Saviour's approach to his house he himself came out to meet him, it was only to entreat him not to trouble himself any further; for that he was not worthy that Jesus should enter under his roof.

This lowliness of mind in the centurion is the more remarkable, because *humility*, in the Gospel sense of the word, is a virtue with which the ancients, and more particularly the Romans, were totally unacquainted. They had not even a word in their language to describe it by. The only word that seems to express it, *humilitas*, signifies baseness, servility, and meanness of spirit, a thing very different from true Christian humility; and indeed this was the only idea they entertained of that virtue. Every thing that we call meek and humble, they considered as mean and contemptible. A haughty, imperious, overbearing temper, a high opinion of their own virtue and wisdom, a contempt of all other nations but their own, a quick sense and a keen resentment, not only of injuries, but even of the slightest affronts, this was the favourite

vourite and predominant character among the Romans; and that gentleness of disposition, that low estimation of our own merits, that ready preference of others to ourselves, that fearfulness of giving offence, that abasement of ourselves in the sight of God which *we* call *humility*, they considered as the mark of a tame, abject, and unmanly mind. When therefore we see this virtuous centurion differing so widely from his countrymen in this respect, we may certainly conclude that his notions of morality were of a much higher standard than theirs, and that his disposition peculiarly fitted him for the reception of the Gospel. For humility is that virtue, which, more than any other, disposes the mind to yield to the evidences, and embrace the doctrines of the Christian revelation. It is that virtue which the Gospel was peculiarly meant to produce, on which it lays the greatest stress, and in which perhaps, more than any other, consists the true essence and vital principle of the Christian temper. We therefore find the strongest exhortations to it in almost every page of the Gospel. "I say to every man that is among you," says St. Paul, "not to think

think more highly of himself than he ought to think, but to think soberly. Mind not high things: be not wise in your own conceits, but condescend to men of low estate. Stretch not yourselves beyond your measure. Blessed are the poor in spirit, says our Lord, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever shall humble himself as a little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect to the lowly. As for the proud, he beholdeth them afar off. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble. Learn of me, says our Saviour, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls*."

I come now lastly to consider that remarkable part of the centurion's character, more particularly noticed by our Lord, I mean his FAITH. "I say unto you I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." Now the reason of the high encomiums bestowed on him by

* Rom. xii. 3. 6. 2 Cor. x. 14. Matth. v. 3. xviii. 4. Psalm cxxxviii. 6. James, iv. 6. 10. Matth. xi. 29.

our Saviour on this account was, because he reasoned himself into a belief of our Lord's power to work miracles, even at a distance; because he who had been bred up in the principles of heathenism, and whose only guide was the light of nature, did notwithstanding frankly submit himself to sufficient evidence, and was induced by the accounts he had received of our Saviour's doctrines and miracles, to acknowledge that he was a divine person. Whereas the Jews, to whom he was first and principally sent, who from their infancy were instructed in the Holy Scriptures, in which were such plain and express promises of the Messiah, and who actually did expect his coming about that time, suffered themselves to be so blinded by their prejudices and passions, that neither the unspotted sanctity of his life, the excellence of his doctrine, nor the repeated and astonishing miracles which he wrought, could make the slightest impression on the greater part of that stubborn people. Hence we may see how impossible it is for any degree of evidence to convince those who are determined not to be convinced; and what little hopes there are of ever satisfying mo-

dern infidels, if they will not be content with the proofs they already have. They are continually complaining for want of evidence; and so were the Jews always calling out for new signs and new wonders, even when miracles were daily wrought before their eyes. We may therefore say of the former what our Saviour said of the latter, "if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead*." It is possible, we find, for incredulity to resist even ocular demonstration; and when obstinacy, vanity, and vice have got thorough possession of the heart, they will not only subdue reason and enslave the understanding, but even bar up all the senses, and shut out conviction at every inlet to the mind. This was most eminently the case with some of the principal Jews. Because our Saviour's appearance did not correspond to their erroneous and preconceived idea of the Messiah, because he was not a triumphant prince, a temporal hero and deliverer, but, above all, because he upbraided them with their vices, and preached

* Luke, xvi. 31.

up repentance and reformation, every testimony that he could give of his divine authority and power was rejected with scorn. In vain did he feed thousands with a handful of provisions; in vain did he send away diseases with a word; in vain did he make the graves give back their dead, rebuke the winds and waves, and evil spirits still more unruly and obstinate than they. In answer to all this they could say, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Does he not eat and drink with publicans and sinners, and with unwashen hands? Does he not even break the sabbath, by commanding sick men to carry their beds on that sacred day*?" These, doubtless, were unanswerable arguments against miracles, signs, and prophecies, against the evidence of sense itself, against the universal voice of nature, bearing testimony to Christ.

The honest centurion, on the contrary, without any Judaical prejudices to distort his understanding, without asking any ill-timed and impertinent questions about the birth or family of Christ, attends only to the facts before him.

* Matth. ix. 11. xiii. 55. Luke, xi. 38. John, v. 18.

He

He had heard of Jesus, had heard of his unblemished life, his heavenly doctrines, his numerous and astonishing miracles, had heard them confirmed by such testimony as no ingenuous mind could resist. He immediately surrenders himself up to such convincing evidence; and so far from requiring (as the Jews continually did, and as modern sceptics still do,) more and stronger proofs, he seems afraid of shewing the slightest distrust of our Saviour's power. He declares his belief of his being able to perform a miracle at any distance; and entreats him not to give himself the trouble of coming to his house in person, but to speak the word only and his servant should be healed.

This, then, is the disposition of mind we ought more particularly to cultivate; that freedom from self-sufficiency and pride and prejudice of every kind, that simplicity and singleness of heart which is open to conviction, and receives, without resistance, the sacred impressions of truth. It is the want of this, not of evidence, that still makes infidels in Europe as it did at first in Asia. It is this principle operating in different ways which now imputes

to fraud and collusion those miracles which the Jews ascribed to Beel-zebub; which now rejects all *human testimony*, as it formerly did even the *perceptions of sense*.

Such were the distinguished virtues of this excellent centurion; the contemplation of whose character suggests to us a variety of important remarks.

The first is, that the miracles of our Lord had the fullest credit given to them, not only (as is sometimes asserted) by low, obscure, ignorant, and illiterate men, but by men of rank and character, by men of the world, by men perfectly competent to ascertain the truth of any facts presented to their observation, and not likely to be imposed upon by false pretences. Of this description were the centurion here mentioned, the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, Dionysius a member of the supreme court of Areopagus at Athens, and several others of equal dignity and consequence.

Secondly, the history of the centurion teaches us, that there is no situation of life, no occupation, no profession, however unfavourable it may appear to the cultivation of religion,

religion, which precludes the possibility or exempts us from the obligation of acquiring those good dispositions, and exercising those Christian virtues which the Gospel requires. Men of the world are apt to imagine that religion was not made for them; that it was intended only for those who pass their days in obscurity, retirement, and solitude, where they meet with nothing to interrupt their devout contemplations, no allurements to divert their attention, and seduce their affections from heaven and heavenly things. But as to those whose lot is cast in the busy and the tumultuous scenes of life, who are engaged in various occupations and professions, or surrounded with gaieties, with pleasures and temptations, it cannot be expected that amidst all these impediments, interruptions, and attractions, they can give up much of their time and thoughts to another and a distant world, when they have so many things that press upon them and arrest their attention in this.

These, I am persuaded, are the real sentiments, and they are perfectly conformable to the actual practice, of a large part of mankind. But to all these pretences, the instance of the

centurion is a direct, complete, and satisfactory answer. He was by his situation in life a man of the world. His profession was that which of all others is generally considered as most adverse to religious sentiments and habits, most contrary to the peaceful, humane, and gentle spirit of the Gospel, and most exposed to the fascination of gaiety, pleasure, thoughtlessness, and dissipation. Yet amidst all these obstructions to purity of heart, to mildness of disposition and sanctity of manners, we see this illustrious CENTURION rising above all the disadvantages of his situation, and, instead of sinking into vice and irreligion, becoming a model of piety and humility, and of all those virtues which necessarily spring from such principles. This is an unanswerable proof, that whenever men abandon themselves to impiety, infidelity, and profligacy, the fault is not in the situation, but in the heart; and that there is no mode of life, no employment or profession, which may not, if we please, be made consistent with a sincere belief in the Gospel, and with the practice of every duty we owe to our Maker, our Redeemer, our fellow-creatures, and ourselves.

Nor

Nor is this the only instance in point: for it is extremely remarkable, and well worthy our attention, that among all the various characters we meet with in the New Testament, there are few represented in a more amiable light, or spoken of in stronger terms of approbation, than those of certain military men. Beside the centurion who is the subject of this Lecture, it was a centurion who at our Saviour's crucifixion gave that voluntary, honest, and unprejudiced testimony in his favour, "*Truly this was the Son of God**." It was a centurion who generously preserved the life of St. Paul, when a proposition was made to destroy him after his shipwreck on the island of Melita†. It was a centurion to whom Saint Peter was sent by the express appointment of God, to make him the first convert among the Gentiles; a distinction of which he seemed, in every respect, worthy: being, as we are told, "a just and a devout man, one that feared God with all his house, that gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway‡."

We see then that our centurion was not the only military man celebrated in the Gospel for

* Matth. xxvii. 54. † Acts, xxvii. 43. ‡ Acts, x. 2.

his

his piety and virtue; nor are there wanting, thank God, distinguished instances of the same kind in our own age, in our own nation, among our own commanders, and in the recent memory of every one here present. All which examples tend to confirm the observation already made, of the perfect consistency of a military, and every other mode of life, with a firm belief in the doctrines and a conscientious obedience to the precepts of religion.

Thirdly, there is still another reflection arising from this circumstance, with which I shall conclude the present Lecture; and this is, that when we observe men bred up in arms repeatedly spoken of in Scripture in such strong terms of commendation as those we have mentioned, we are authorized to conclude, that the profession they are engaged in is not, as a mistaken sect of Christians amongst us professes to think, an unlawful one. On the contrary, it seems to be studiously placed by the sacred writers in a favourable and an honourable light; and in this light it always has been and always ought to be considered. He who undertakes an occupation of great toil and great danger, for the purpose of serving, defending, and protecting

tecting his country, is a most valuable and respectable member of society; and if he conducts himself with valour, fidelity, and humanity, and amidst the horrors of war cultivates the gentle manners of peace, and the virtues of a devout and holy life, he most amply deserves, and will assuredly receive, the esteem, the admiration, and the applause of his grateful country, and, what is of still greater importance, the approbation of his God.

LECTURE IX.

MATTHEW X.

I NOW proceed to the consideration of the 10th Chapter of St. Matthew.

In the preceding chapter we find our Saviour working a great variety of miracles. He healed the man that was sick of the palsy, and forgave his sins; a plain proof of his divinity, because none but God has the power and the prerogative of forgiving sins; and therefore the Jews accused him of blasphemy for *pretending* to this power. He also cured the woman who touched the hem of his garment. He raised to life the deceased daughter of the ruler of the synagogue. He restored to sight the two blind men that followed him; and he cast out from a dumb man the devil with which he was possessed, and restored him to his speech. These miracles are particularly recorded:

corded: but besides these, there must have been a prodigious number wrought by him, of which no distinct mention is made; for we are informed in the 35th verse that he went about *all* the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom, and healing *every* sickness and *every* disease among the people.

These continued miracles must necessarily have produced a great number of converts. And accordingly we find, the multitude of his followers was now so great, that he found it necessary to appoint some coadjutors to himself in this great work. "The harvest truly is plenteous, says he to his disciples, but the labourers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest*."

These labourers he now determined to send forth; and in pursuance of this resolution, we find him in the beginning of this chapter calling together his disciples, out of whom he selected twelve, called by St. Matthew apostles, or messengers; whom he sent forth to preach the Gospel, and furnished them with

* Matth. ix. 37, 38.

ample

ample powers for that purpose; powers such as nothing less than Omnipotence could bestow. The names of these apostles were as follow: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, another James, Thaddeus or Jude, Simon, Judas Iscariot. These twelve persons, St. Matthew tells us, Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any cities of the Samaritans enter ye not; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; and as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand*." This was the business which they were sent to accomplish; they were to go about the country of Judæa, and to preach to the Jews in the first place the holy religion which their divine Master had just began to teach. Then follow their *powers*; "heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils."

After this come their instructions, and a variety of directions how to conduct themselves in the discharge of their arduous and important mission, of which I shall take notice hereafter; but must first offer to your consi-

* Matth. x. 2—3.

deration

deration a few remarks on this extraordinary designation of the apostles to their important office.

And in the first place, who were the men singled out by our blessed Lord for the purpose of diffusing his religion through the world; that is, for the very singular purpose of persuading men to relinquish the religion of their ancestors, the principles they had imbibed from their infancy, the customs, the prejudices, the habits, the ways of thinking, which they had for a long course of years indulged, and to adopt in their room a system of thinking and acting in many respects directly opposite to them; a religion exposing them to many present hardships and severe trials, and referring them for their reward to a distant period of time, and an invisible world? Was it to be expected that such a change as this, such a sudden and violent revolution in the minds of men, could be brought about by common and ordinary instruments? Would it not require agents of a very superior order, of considerable influence from their birth and wealth and situation in life, men of the profoundest erudition, of the brightest

brightest talents, of the most consummate knowledge of the world and the human heart, of the most insinuating manners, of the most commanding and fascinating eloquence? Were then the apostles of this description? Quite the countrary. They were plain, humble, unpretending men, of low birth and low occupations, without learning, without education, without any extraordinary endowments, natural or acquired, without any thing, in short, to recommend them but their simplicity, integrity, and purity of manners. With what hopes of success could men such as these set about the most difficult of all enterprizes, the reformation of a corrupt world, and the conversion of it to a new faith? Yet we all know that they actually did accomplish these two most arduous things, and that on the foundations they laid, the whole superstructure of the Christian church has been raised, and the divine truths of the Gospel spread through all parts of the civilized world. How then is this to be accounted for? It is utterly impossible to account for it in any way but that which Christ himself points out, in this very charge to his apostles: "Heal the sick,"

says

says he to them in the 8th verse, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils." Here is the explanation of the whole mystery. It was the powers with which they were invested, the miracles they were enabled to perform, which procured such multitudes of converts. The people saw that God was with them, and that therefore every thing they taught must be true.

Here is at once a sufficient cause assigned for the effect produced by agents, apparently so unequal to the production of it. We challenge all the infidels in the world to assign any other adequate cause. They have never yet done it; and we assert with confidence that they never can.

These then were the powers the Apostles carried along with them; and where shall we find the sovereign that could ever furnish his ambassadors with such qualifications as these? If they were asked with what authority they were invested, and what proofs they could give that they were actually commissioned to instruct mankind in the principles of true religion, by that great personage the Son of God, whose servants and ministers they pre-

tended to be, their answer was short and decisive; bring us your sick, and we will heal them; show us your lepers, and we will cleanse them; produce your dead, and we will restore them to life. It would not be very easy to dispute the authenticity of such credentials as these.

It is further to be observed on this head, that the circumstance of our Saviour not only working miracles himself, but also enabling others to perform them, is an instance of divine power, to which no other prophet or teacher before him, true or false, ever pretended. In this, as in many other respects, he stands unrivalled and alone.

After this follow some directions, no less singular and new. "Provide neither gold nor silver, nor brass in your purses; nor scrip for your journey; neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves*."

That is, they were to take a long journey, without making any other provision for it than the staff in their hand, and the clothes they had on; for, says Jesus, the workman is worthy of his meat; an intimation that the

* Matth. x. 9, 10.

providence

providence of God would watch over and supply their wants. This required some confidence in their Master; and unless they had good grounds for thinking that it was in his power to engage Providence on their side (or in other words, that he was actually the Son of God) they would scarce have run the risk of so unpromising an expedition. But this conclusion grows infinitely stronger when we come to the declaration in the next and following verses: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the councils; and they will scourge you in the synagogues; and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my name's sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles; and the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death; and ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake*."

* Matth. x. 16, 17, 18, 21, 22.

What now shall we say to this extraordinary and unexampled declaration?

When a sovereign sends his ambassadors to a foreign country, he makes an ample provision for their journey, he assigns them a liberal allowance for their support, and generally holds out at the same time the prospect of a future reward for their labours and their services to their country on their return from their embassy. And without this, few men would be disposed to undertake the commission.

But here every thing is the reverse; instead of support, they were to meet with persecution; instead of an honourable reception, they were to experience universal hatred and detestation; instead of reward, they were to be exposed to certain ruin and destruction, and to be let loose like so many sheep among wolves.

Can we now conceive it possible that any men in their senses should, without some very powerful and extraordinary motive, voluntarily undertake such a commission as this, in which their only recompense was to be affliction, misery, pain, and death; in which, all the

the natural affections of the human heart were to be extinguished or inverted, and their nearest relations, their parents, children, or brethren, were to be their persecutors and executioners? Is it usual for human beings wantonly and needlessly to expose themselves to such evils as these, without the least prospect of any advantage to themselves or their families? You may say perhaps that simple, ignorant, uneducated men, like the apostles, might easily be deluded by an artful leader, and betrayed into very dreadful calamities, and that we see multitudes thus deceived and ruined every day. It is true; but where in this case is the *art* of the leader, or the *delusion* of his followers? In the cases alluded to, men are induced to embark in perilous undertakings, and to run headlong into destruction, by fair promises and tempting offers, by promises of liberty, of wealth, of honour, of popularity, of glory. But here, instead of employing any art, or making any attempt to *deceive* his followers, our Saviour plainly tells them they are to expect nothing but what is most dreadful to human nature. Whatever they suffered

therefore they suffered with their eyes open, and with their own free choice and consent. It is true they were plain, ignorant men; but they could feel pain, and they could have no more fondness for misery and death than other people. Yet this they did actually and cheerfully undergo at the command of their Lord. How is this to be explained and accounted for? Is there any instance upon record before this in the annals of the world, where twelve grave sober men, without any reason, and without being misled by any artifice or delusion whatever, voluntarily exposed themselves at the desire of another person to persecution, torment, and destruction! There must have been some most cogent reason for such a conduct as this; and that reason could be nothing less than a full and perfect conviction arising from the miracles which they saw with their own eyes, and which they themselves were enabled to perform, that Christ was what he pretended to be, the Son of God; that all power was given to him in heaven and on earth; and that he was able to fulfil the promises he had made them of a recompense

in a future life, infinitely surpassing in magnitude and in duration all the sufferings they could experience in the present world.

This is the only rational account to be given of their conduct, and it presents to us in a short compass a strong convincing evidence of the truth of the Christian revelation.

In order to fortify the minds of his disciples against the severe trials they were to undergo, our blessed Lord, in the 28th verse, adds the following exhortation: "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

This passage contains a decisive proof of two very important doctrines, the existence of a soul distinct from the body, and the continuaance of that soul after death (both of which, in direct opposition to this and many other passages of Scripture, some late writers have dared to controvert); and it plainly refers the apostles to the consideration of a future life, in which all their views, their hopes and fears, were to center, and by which their conduct in this world was entirely to be regulated. The worst their enemies could do to them in

this life was to kill the body, which must some time or other be destroyed by age or disease. But God was able to kill the soul, which was formed for immortality, to annihilate it at once, or to condemn it to everlasting punishment. It was therefore of infinitely more consequence to avoid his displeasure, and to secure his approbation by performing their duty, than, by shamefully deserting it, to escape the infliction of the bitterest evils that their fellow creatures could bring upon them.

In conformity to this advice, he tells them, "that he that endureth to the end shall be saved: and that he who loses his life for his sake in this world, shall find it, in a far more exalted sense, in the next*."

This was solid comfort and substantial support. But unless our Lord had given them irresistible miraculous evidence of the reality of this future reward, unless they had absolute demonstration of its certainty, it was utterly impossible that they could be so mad as to sacrifice to this expectation every thing most valuable in this life, and even life itself.

* Matth x. 22—39.

As a still further support under the terrifying prospect which our blessed Lord had held up to the apostles, he assures them that the providence of God would continually superintend and watch over them.

"Are not two sparrows," says he, "sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father; but the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows*."

Here we have that most important and comfortable doctrine of a particular Providence plainly and clearly laid down.

That he who erected the immense and magnificent fabric of the universe will continue to regard and to preserve the work of his own hands, and maintain what is called the general order of nature, and the ordinary course of human affairs, is so consonant to reason and common sense, that few even of the pagans who believed the being of a God, entertained any doubt of this *general* superintendence of the Deity over the worlds he has created, and the inhabitants he has placed in them. But

* Matth. x. 29, 30, 31.

when

when we descend from this comprehensive view of things to the several constituent parts of the general system, and to every individual of every species of animated beings dispersed throughout the whole; when we reflect how very inconsiderable a place this globe that we inhabit holds amongst the celestial bodies, how very small a portion it occupies of unbounded space, and how infinitely minute and insignificant every human creature must appear in the vast mass of created beings, we can hardly think it possible that the care of the Supreme Being should extend to ourselves; we cannot help fearing that we shall be lost and overlooked in the immensity of creation, and that we are objects far too small and minute to fall within the sphere of our Maker's observation. The more we reason on this subject, the more ground we shall find for these apprehensions; and there is nothing, I will venture to say, in the whole compass of what is called natural religion or modern philosophy, that can in the smallest degree tend to allay or to remove these natural, these unavoidable misgivings of the human mind.

Here then is one of those many instances

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in which we can have no certainty, no solid ground for the sole of our foot to stand upon, but in the Gospel of Christ. Our reason, though sent out ever so often in search of a resting-place, returns to us, like Noah's dove, when the waters covered the earth, without any token of comfort. It is Scripture only which in this important point can give rest unto our souls. There we are assured that every individual being, even the least and most contemptible, even the sparrow that is sold for less than a farthing, is under the eye of the Almighty; that, so far from man being too inconsiderable for the notice of his Maker, the minutest parts of his body, the very hairs of his head, are all numbered. These very strong instances are plainly chosen on purpose to quiet all our fears, and to banish from our minds every idea of our being too small and insignificant for the care and protection of the Almighty.

This most consolatory doctrine of a particular Providence, of a Providence which watches over every individual of the human race, places the Christian in a situation totally different from that of every one who disbelieves

disbelieves revelation. The latter must conceive himself under no other government but that of chance or fortune, and of course must consider the whole happiness of his life as exposed every moment to the mercy of the next accident that may befal him. The true believer, on the contrary, has the most perfect conviction that he is constantly under the protection of an almighty and merciful God, in whom he lives, and moves, and has his being; "whose eyes are over the righteous, and whose ears are open to their prayers;" that therefore if he lives, so as to merit the approbation of his heavenly Father, he has every reason to hope for such a degree of happiness, even here, as the imperfection of human nature will admit; and he is certain that nothing *dreadful* can befal him without the knowledge and permission of his great Protector, who will even in that case support him under it, and render it ultimately conducive to his good.

The next passage in this chapter to which I shall direct your attention, is that very remarkable one which has furnished the enemies of Christianity with so much pretence for obloquy and invective against the Gospel, and has been

been the source of no small uneasiness and dismay to some of its warmest friends. The passage I mean is this; "Think not" (says our Lord) "I am come to send peace on earth, I came not to send peace, but a sword; for I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes shall be those of his own household*."

What shall we say now (exclaims the infidel) to this extraordinary declaration? Here we have the Author of the Christian religion himself openly and explicitly avowing that he came to send a sword upon earth, to dissolve all the tender endearing ties of domestic affection, to set the nearest relations at variance, and to arm them with inextinguishable rage and rancour against each other.

But can this be really the sense of our Saviour's words? Can HE mean to denounce war and destruction to the human species? HE, whose whole religion breathes nothing but peace, gentleness, kindness, and compassion, to every human being; who made charity, or the love of man, the great characteristic mark of

* Matth. x, 34, 35, 36.

his

his religion; who expressly forbade his disciples "to call down fire from heaven" on those who had insulted them; who in this very chapter commanded them "to be harmless as doves; and declared that he came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them*?" It is evidently impossible that the author of such precepts and such professions could mean literally to spread ruin and desolation over the earth. What then was his meaning? It was to obviate an error into which the apostles would be very apt to fall, and which probably our Saviour saw rising in their minds. You tell us (they perhaps said within themselves), you tell us that we shall be persecuted, tormented, and put to death, and that even by those who are most nearly connected with us. But how is this possible? How can all this happen under your protection, under the reign of the Messiah, THE PRINCE OF PEACE, under whom we have always been given to expect tranquillity, repose, and happiness? To this supposed reasoning, our Saviour answers; You are mistaken in your idea of that peace, which I, your Messiah, am to give you. It is not immediate temporal peace, but peace in

* Matth. x. 16. Luke ix. 56.

a spiritual

a spiritual sense, peace in your own minds, and peace with God. Ultimately indeed I shall establish peace in *every* sense of the word, and "shall make wars to cease in all the world*;" but at present, and indeed for many years to come, I shall not bring peace but a sword upon earth. The promulgation of my religion will be productive of much dissension, cruelty, and persecution, not only to you, but to all those who for many ages afterwards shall preach the Gospel in purity and truth. The true *cause* of this will be the wickedness and the ferocious passions of men; but the occasion and the *pretence* for it will be the holy religion which you are to promulgate. In this sense, and in this only, it is that I may be said to bring a sword upon earth; but they who *really* bring it, are the open enemies or pretended friends of the Gospel.

Still it is said by the adversaries of our faith, that however these words may be interpreted, the fact is, that Christians themselves have brought a sword, and a most destructive sword, upon earth: that they have persecuted one another with inconceivable rancour and

* Ps. xlvi. 9.

fury;

fury; and that their dissensions have produced more bloodshed, misery, and desolation, among mankind, than all the other wars of contending nations put together.

To this I answer in the first place, that the charge as here stated is not true. It is not true that wars of religion have been more frequent and more sanguinary than any others. On the contrary, it may be proved in the clearest manner, from the most authentic facts, that by far the greatest number of wars, as well as the longest, most extensive, and most destructive, have been owing to causes purely political, and those too sometimes of the most trivial nature. And if we can allow men to harass and destroy one another for a mere point of honour, or a few acres of land, why should we think it strange to see them defending, with the same heat and bitterness, what they conceive to be the most essential requisite to happiness both here and hereafter?

2dly, I must observe, that a very large part of those animosities, wars, and massacres, which have been usually styled *religious*, and with the entire guilt of which, Christianity has been very unjustly loaded, have been altogether, or

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at least in a great measure, owing to causes of a very different nature; to the ambition, the resentment, the avarice, the rapacity of princes and of conquerors, who assumed the mask of religion to veil their real purposes, and who pretended to fight in the cause of God and his church, when they had in reality nothing else in view than to advance their power or extend their dominions. All history is full of instances of this kind.

3dly, It should be remembered, that the wildest excesses of religious persecution did not take place till the world was overrun with barbarity, ignorance, bigotry, and superstition; till military ideas predominated in every thing, in the form of government, in the temper of the laws, in the tenure of lands, and in the administration of justice itself; and till the Scriptures were shut up in a foreign tongue, and were therefore unknown to the people. It was not therefore from the Gospel, but from a total *ignorance* of the Gospel, from a total perversion of its true temper, genius, and spirit, that these excesses and enormities arose.

4thly, That this is the real truth of the case,

appears demonstrably from this circumstance, that when after the Reformation the Scriptures were translated into the several vernacular languages of Europe, and the real nature of the Christian Revelation became of course more generally known, the violence of persecution began to abate; and as the sacred writings were more and more studied, and their true sense better understood, the baneful spirit of intolerance lost ground every day, and the divine principle of Christian charity and benevolence has been continually gaining fresh strength; till at length, at the present moment, persecution by Christians on the score of religion only has almost entirely vanished from the face of the earth; and we may venture to indulge the hope, that wars of religion, strictly so called, will be heard of no more.

I now proceed to explain the verses immediately following that which we have been just considering.

"I am come, says our Lord, to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes shall be those of his own household."

This

This passage is a clear proof that the calamities and miseries predicted in the preceding verse relate primarily and principally to the apostles themselves, because these words are almost a repetition of what our Lord applied to *them* in the 27th verse, "The brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death*."

Now as these cruelties were inflicted on the apostles, not by believers, but by unbelieving Jews and heathens, that is, by the enemies of the Gospel, it is evident, that when our Saviour says he came to set a man at variance against his father, and so on, he meant only to say, that the religion which he taught would meet with the most violent opposition from the world, and would expose his apostles and disciples to the most unjust and inhuman treatment, even sometimes from their nearest relations.

Our Lord then goes on to say, "He that loveth father and mother more than me, is not worthy of me†." This has an evident refe-

* Matth. x. 21. † Matth. x. 37.

rence to the two preceding verses; in which our Lord had declared, that amidst the various miseries that would be occasioned by the wickedness and barbarity of those who rejected and resisted the Christian religion, dissensions would arise even among those most nearly connected with each other, and the true Christian would sometimes find his bitterest enemies even in the bosom of his own family. A father would perhaps persecute his own son, and a mother her daughter, on account of her religious opinion, and would by argument and by influence endeavour to persuade, or by authority and power to compel them to abjure their faith. In cases such as these our Lord here intimates, that when the choice is between renouncing our nearest relations and renouncing our religion, we must not hesitate a moment what part we are to take; we must, to obey God rather than man, we must give up all, and follow Christ*. "He that loveth father and mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son and daughter more than me, is not worthy of me." That is, evidently, when the nearest and

* Acts v. 29. Mark x. 28.

dearest

dearest relations come in competition with our belief in Christ, and obedience to his commands, our affection for them and deference to their opinions must give place to love for our Redeemer and attachment to our Maker.

In the parallel place of St. Luke this precept is expressed in still stronger terms. "If any man come to me, and *hate* not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple*."

The mind of the reader is at the first view apt to revolt at the seeming harshness of this declaration; but it is evidently nothing more than a bolder and more figurative way (according to a well-known Hebrew idiom) of conveying the very same sentiment that St. Matthew clothes in gentler language. It means nothing more than that we ought to entertain a more ardent affection for our heavenly Father than for our earthly parents; and that his commands must be preferred to theirs whenever they happen to interfere. And

* Luke xiv. 26.

in the same manner several other apparently severe injunctions in the Gospel are to be explained and mitigated by others of the same import, but more perspicuously and more mildly expressed.

But we are not only enjoined to love Christ and his religion more than our nearest relations, where they happen to interfere, but even more than our own life. "He that taketh not his cross and followeth after me, is not worthy of me*." This plainly alludes to the custom of persons who were going to be crucified bearing their own cross; and the literal and primary meaning is, that we should be ready, if called upon, to undergo even that painful and ignominious death, rather than renounce our faith. This indeed is a most severe trial; but it is a trial which it is not only our duty but our interest to undergo, if reduced to the necessity either of forfeiting our life, or renouncing our allegiance to Christ. For we are told here by our Lord himself, that "he who findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for his sake shall find it†." That is, whoever to save his life apostatizes

* Matth. x. 38. † Ibid. 39.

from

from his faith, shall be punished with the loss of that life which alone deserves the name, life everlasting. But he who sacrifices his life to his religion in this world, shall be rewarded with eternal life in the world to come.

LECTURE X.

MATTHEW xii.

THE next chapter which seems more peculiarly to deserve our attention, and to require some explanation and illustration, is the 12th chapter of St. Matthew.

It begins thus, "At that time Jesus went on the sabbath-day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath-day. But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shew-bread, which it was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? Or have

ye

ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath-day the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? But I say unto you, that in this place is one greater than the temple. But if ye had known what this meaneth, *I will have mercy and not sacrifice*, ye would not have condemned the guiltless; for the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath-day. And when he was departed thence, he went into the synagogue. And there was a man which had his hand withered; and they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath-day? that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath-day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath-day. Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth, and it was restored whole, like as the other."

Although here are two different transactions related, that of plucking the ears of corn, and healing the withered hand, yet as they are closely connected together by the evangelist, and

and relate to the same subject, the observation of the sabbath, I have recited the whole passage comprehending both these incidents at length, that you might have before you at one view all that our Saviour has said on this important branch of our duty, and that we might fully understand what kind of *rest* it is that our blessed Lord judged to be necessary on the Jewish sabbath, and what limitations and exceptions to it he admitted; from whence we may form some judgment what our own duty is on that holy day which we justly call THE LORD'S DAY, and which must be considered as the Christian sabbath.

From this passage, as well as from many others, it appears, that the Jews had their eyes constantly fixed on Jesus and his followers, and most anxiously sought out for opportunities of fastening some guilt upon them. It appears also that they were extremely unfortunate in these attempts, and compelled (as in the present instance) to have recourse to the silliest and most trivial charges; and even these turned out to be perfectly unfounded. From whence I think we may fairly draw this inference, that the character and conduct of our Lord

Lord and his disciples were perfectly blameless; since with all the industry of so many sharp-sighted observers, so extremely well disposed to discover guilt or to make it, they could find no real fault in him.

The pretence on this occasion was, that the disciples, by plucking a few ears of corn, and eating them as they passed through a cornfield on the sabbath-day, had violated the rest of that holy day, and thus transgressed the Mosaical law. But to this our Lord replied, that in cases of extreme necessity the severity of that law might be dispensed with and relaxed. As a proof of this, he appealed first to the example of David, the man after God's own heart, who (as may be seen in 1 Samuel, xxi. 6.) when he and his men were reduced to great straits for want of food, asked and obtained from Ahimelech the priest a part of the consecrated bread which had been taken from the altar, and which it was not lawful for any but the priests to eat. The other instance he adduced was that of the priests themselves, who in the necessary service of the temple on the sabbath-day were obliged to work with their own hands, by lighting the fires, killing the

the victims, offering up the sacrifices, &c. This in any other persons would have been considered as profanations of the sabbath; but in the priests who were engaged in the duties of religion it was not.

These arguments addressed to a Jew were in themselves unanswerable; because they appealed to the practice of persons whom the Jews held sacred, and whose conduct they durst not condemn. But they went still further than this; they went to establish this general principle, that there might be obligations of a force superior even to the law of Moses, and to which it ought in certain cases to give way; as in the first instance to the pressing demands of necessity, in the other to the services of the temple.

If then in these cases the law might be dispensed with, still more might it be overruled by a Power paramount to every other power, by Him who was far greater and holier than the temple itself, who was *Lord even of the sabbath*, who was indeed supreme Lord over all, and might therefore authorise his disciples, in a case of real urgency, to depart a little from the rigour of the sabbatical rest.

It should be observed here, that where St. Matthew says, "the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath-day;" St. Mark, in the parallel place, expresses himself thus: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." That is, the sabbath was given to man for his *benefit*, for the improvement of his soul, as well as for the rest of his body; and the latter, when necessary, must be sacrificed to the former. For man was not made for the sabbath; was not made to be a slave to it, to be so servilely bound down to the strict Pharisaical observance of it, as to lose, by that rigorous adherence to the letter, opportunities of doing essential service to himself and his fellow creatures.

To this irresistible force of reasoning, our blessed Lord adds another argument of considerable weight: "If ye had known, says he, what this meaneth, *I will have mercy and not sacrifice*, ye would not have condemned the guiltless." The quotation is from the prophet Hosea; the words are supposed to be those of God himself; and the meaning is, according to a well-known Jewish idiom, *I prefer mercy to sacrifice*: that is, when any ceremonial institution

stitution interferes with the execution of any charitable or pious design, the former must give place to the latter; as in the present instance, a strict observance of the sabbath must not be suffered to deprive my disciples of that refreshment which is necessary to support them under the fatigue of following me, and dispensing to mankind the blessings of the Gospel. We see then with what superstitious rigour the Jews adhered to the letter of their law respecting the Jewish sabbath; and with what superior wisdom and dignity our Lord endeavoured to raise their minds above such trivial things to the true spirit of it, to the life and soul of religion.

The fault however here reproved and corrected is not one into which we of this country are likely to fall, nor is there any need to warn us against imitating the Jews in this instance. There is no danger that we should carry the observance of *our* sabbath too far, or that we should be too scrupulously nice in avoiding every the minutest infringement of the rest and sanctity of that holy day. The bent and tendency of the present times is too evidently to a contrary extreme, to an excessive

sive relaxation instead of an excessive strictness in the regard shown to the Lord's day. I am not now speaking of the *religious* duties appropriated to the Lord's day, for these are not now before us, but solely of the *rest*, the *repose* which it requires. This rest is plainly infringed, whenever the lower classes of people continue their ordinary occupations on the sabbath, and whenever the higher employ their servants and their cattle on this day in needless labour. This, however, we see too frequently done, more particularly by *selecting* Sunday as a day for travelling, for taking long journeys, which might as well be performed at any other time. This is a direct violation of the fourth commandment, which expressly gives the sabbath as a day of rest to our servants and our cattle.

This temporary suspension of labour, this refreshment and relief from incessant toil, is most graciously allowed even to the brute creation, by the great Governor of the universe, whose mercy extends over *all* his works. It is the boon of Heaven itself. It is a small drop of comfort thrown into their cup of misery; and to wrest from them this only privilege,

lege, this sweetest consolation of their wretched existence, is a degree of inhumanity for which there wants a name; and of which, few people, I am persuaded, if they could be brought to reflect seriously upon it, would ever be guilty.

These profanations of the sabbath are however sometimes defended on the ground of the very passage we have been just considering. It is alleged, that as our Lord here reproves the Jews for too rigorous an attention to the rest of the sabbath, it conveys an intimation that we ought not to be too exact and scrupulous in that respect; and that many things may in fact be allowable which timid minds may consider as unlawful. But it should be observed, that Jesus condemns nothing in the conduct of the Jews but what was plainly absurd and superstitious; and he allows of no exceptions to that rest from labour which they observed on the sabbath, except simply works of *necessity* and *charity*; such for instance as those very cases which gave occasion to the conversation in this chapter between Christ and the Jews, that of the disciples plucking the ears of corn on the

sabbath-day to satisfy their hunger, and that of our Saviour's restoring the withered hand. It is lawful, in short, as our Saviour expresses it, to *do well* on the sabbath-day; to preserve ourselves, and to benefit our fellow creatures. Thus far then we may go, but no farther. In other respects, the *rest* of the Lord's day is to be observed; and those very exceptions which our Saviour makes are a proof, that in every other case he approves and sanctions the duty of resting on the sabbath-day. It is also remarkable, that our own laws, grounding themselves no doubt on this declaration of Christ, make the same exceptions to the rest of the sabbath that he does; they allow works of necessity and charity, but no others*. To these therefore we ought to confine ourselves as nearly as may be; and with these exceptions, and these only, consecrate the sabbath as a *holy rest unto the Lord.*

This rest the Almighty enjoined, not, as is sometimes pretended, to the Jews only, but to all mankind. For even immediately after the great work of creation was finished, we are told, "that God ended his work that he had

* See the Statute of 29 C. 2. c. 7

made, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work which he had made; and God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because that in it he had rested from all his work, which God created and made *." It is evident therefore that the seventh day was to be a day of rest *to all mankind*, in memory of God having on that day finished his great work of creation; and this seventh day, after our Lord's resurrection, was changed by his apostles to the *first* day of the week, on which our Lord rose from the dead, and rested from *his* labours; so that the rest of this day is now commemorative of both these important events, the creation and the resurrection.

I now proceed to consider the consequences of this conversation between our Lord and the Pharisees on the subject of the sabbath. One should have expected that so wise and rational an explanation of the law respecting that day, releasing men from the senseless severities imposed upon them by the servile fears of superstition, but at the same time requiring all that respite from labour which is really conducive to the glory of God and happiness of man;

* Gen. ii. 2, 3.

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one should have expected, I say, that such wisdom and such benevolence as this would have triumphed over even Pharisaical obstinacy, and extorted the admiration and applause of his hearers. But stubborn prejudices, and deep-rooted malignity, are not so easily subdued. For see what actually followed. "The Pharisees went out," says the evangelist, "and held a council how they might destroy him." Destroy him! for what? Why, for giving ease to timid minds and scrupulous consciences, and for restoring the withered hand of a poor decrepit man. And were these deeds that deserved destruction? Would it not rather have been the just reward of those inhuman wretches who were capable of conceiving so execrable a project: and would not our Saviour have been justified in calling down fire from heaven, as he easily might, to consume them? But his heart abhorred the thought. He pursued a directly opposite conduct; and instead of inflicting upon them a punishment which might have destroyed them, he chose to set them an example that might amend them. He chose to shew them the difference between their tem-

per and his own, between those malignant vindictive passions which governed *them*, and the mild, gentle, conciliating disposition which his religion inspired; between the spirit of the world, in short, and the spirit of the Gospel. He withdrew himself silently and quietly from them; and great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all; and, to avoid all irritation and all contest, he charged them that they should not make him known. "Thus was fulfilled, (says the evangelist,) that which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall show judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry: neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory *." A most sublime passage! which may thus be paraphrased. Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased! I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall teach true reli-

* Isaiah, xlii. 1—3.

gion,

gion, not only to the people of Israel, but to the heathens also; and this he shall do with the utmost tenderness, mildness, and meekness, without contention and noise, without tumult and disturbance. A bruised reed shall he not break; he shall not bear hard upon a wounded and contrite, and truly humble and penitent heart, bowed down with a sense of its infirmities. And smoking flax shall he not quench; the faintest spark of returning virtue he will not extinguish by severity; but will cherish and encourage the one, and will raise and animate and enliven the other; till by these gentle conciliating means he shall have triumphed over the wickedness and malevolence of his enemies, and completely established his religion throughout the world. What an amiable picture is here given us of the divine Author of our faith! and how exactly does this prophetic description correspond to the whole tenour of his conduct in the propagation of his religion!

The next remarkable occurrences which present themselves in this chapter are those of our Saviour casting a devil out of a man that was both blind and dumb; the reflections

which the Pharisees threw upon him in consequence of this miracle, and the effectual manner in which he silenced them, and repelled their calumny.

The passage is as follows: "Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil, blind and dumb: and he healed him; insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the Son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, this fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils. And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation: and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand. And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?"

This passage affords room for a variety of observation.

In the first place it is evident from this, as well as from many other passages of holy writ, that at the time when our Saviour promulged his religion, there was a calamity incident to the human race, of which at present we know nothing,

nothing, and that is, the possession of their bodies by evil spirits, or devils (as they are usually called in Scripture), which occasioned great torments to the unhappy sufferers, and often deprived them both of their sight and hearing, as in the present instance. Such possessions having long since ceased, they have appeared to several learned men so incredible, that they have been led to deny that they ever existed, and to maintain that they were only diseases of a violent and terrifying nature, attended with convulsive or epileptic fits; that this sort of disease was ascribed by the Jews to the operation of evil spirits; and that our Saviour, in compliance with their prejudices, treated them as cases of real possession, and pretended to cast out devils, when in fact he only cured the disorder with which the patient was afflicted.

This opinion is supported by great names; but however great and respectable they may be, it appears to me utterly indefensible.

Every expression that our Lord makes use of with respect to these demoniacs plainly supposes them to be really possessed; and it is

not easy to assign any admissible reason why he should treat them as such if they were not so, and why he should not correct instead of countenancing so gross an error; as such a conduct could answer no one good purpose, and seems hard to reconcile with his own uniform fairness and sincerity of mind. To have done it to magnify his own power in casting out the evil spirits, would have been, to all appearance, a very needless expedient; because the immediate removal of a natural disease (if it was one) would have been an equal proof of his divine power. But besides this, there is every where a plain distinction made between common diseases and demoniacal possessions; which shews that they were totally different things. In the fourth chapter of this Gospel, where the very first mention is made of these possessions, it is said, that our Lord's fame went throughout all Syria, and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils; and he healed them. Here you see those that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those possessed with devils, are mentioned as distinct

and

and separate persons; a plain proof that the demoniacal possessions were not natural diseases: and the very same distinction is made in several other passages of holy writ.

There can be no doubt therefore that the demoniacs were persons really possessed with evil spirits; and although it may seem strange to us, yet we find from Josephus, and other historians, that it was in those times no uncommon case. In fact, it appears that about the time of our Lord's ministry, that tremendous spirit, Satan, or, as he is sometimes called in Scripture, the Prince of this world, had obtained an extraordinary degree of power over the human race, inflicting upon them the cruellest pains and torments, depriving them of their senses, rendering them wretched in themselves, and terrible to all around them. To subdue this formidable and wicked being, and to destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, was one great object of our Saviour's divine mission; and it seems to have been indispensably necessary for accomplishing the redemption of mankind, that the kingdom of Satan should in the first place be destroyed, and

and that the sons of men should be rescued from that horrible and disgraceful state of slavery in which he had long held them enthralled. One of the first steps, therefore, that our Lord took before he entered on his ministry, was to establish his superiority over this great enemy of mankind: which he did in that memorable scene of the temptation in the wilderness; and among the earliest of his miracles recorded, is that of casting out devils from those who were possessed by them. And perhaps one reason why these possessions were permitted, might be to afford our Lord an opportunity of giving the Jews a visible and ocular demonstration of his decided superiority and sovereignty over the prince of the devils and all his agents, and of his power to subdue this great adversary of the human species. He appears indeed to have been in a state of constant hostility and warfare with this wicked spirit; and in this very passage, Satan is described by our Saviour under the image of a *strong man*, whom it was necessary *to bind* before you could spoil his house, and exterminate him and his coadjutors, as Jesus was then

doing. Yet so little were the Jews sensible of this enmity between Christ and Beelzebub, that on the contrary they charged them with being friends and confederates. They said, "This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils." The answer of our Lord to this was decisive and satisfactory to every reasonable mind. "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation: and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand. And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself, how shall then his kingdom stand?" His argument is this: How absurd and preposterous is it to suppose that Satan will act against himself, by expelling his own ministers and agents whom he has sent to take possession of the minds and bodies of men, and by assisting me to establish my religion, and thereby diffuse virtue and happiness throughout the world which it is *his* great object to destroy, and to introduce vice and misery in their room. This must clearly end in his ruin, and the overthrow of his empire over mankind. It is evident then that it is not by *his* assistance, but by the power of God, that I cast out devils;

devils; and if so, it is clear to demonstration that I am commissioned by Heaven to teach true religion to mankind.

I cannot quit this subject of miracles without observing, what a remarkable difference there is between the sentiments of modern infidels and those of the first enemies of the Gospel respecting the miracles of Christ. The former assert, that our Saviour wrought no real miracles; that miracles are in their own nature incredible and impossible; and that no human testimony whatever can give credit to events so contrary to experience, and so repugnant to the ordinary course of nature. But go to those unbelievers who lived in the earliest ages of the Gospel, and even to those who were eye-witnesses to our Lord's miracles, and they will tell you a very different story. *They* assert, that Jesus *did* work miracles; they acknowledge that he did expel evil spirits out of those that were possessed. They ascribed the miracle indeed to the power of Beelzebub, not of God. But this we know to be absurdity and nonsense. The fact of the miraculous cure they did not dispute; and this at once establishes the divine mission of our Lord.

Lord. To which then of these two descriptions of infidels shall we give most credit; to those who lived near eighteen hundred years after the miracles were performed, or to those who saw them wrought with their own eyes, and, though they detested the author of them, admitted the reality of his wonderful works?

Our Lord then, continuing his conversation with the Pharisees, addresses to them, in the 31st verse, these remarkable words:

"Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.

Our Lord's meaning in this obscure and alarming passage seems to be this; there is no other sin or blasphemy which argues such a total depravation of mind, but that it may be repented of and forgiven. Even he that speaks against me, the Son of God, and is not convinced

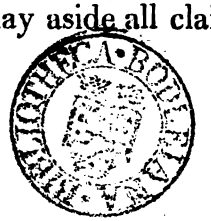
convinced by my preaching, may yet be afterwards converted by the power of the Holy Ghost, by the miracles which he enables me and my disciples to work, and may obtain remission of his sin. But he that shall obstinately resist this last method of conviction (that of miracles wrought before his eyes) and shall maliciously revile these most evident operations of the Spirit of God, contrary to the reason of his own mind and the dictates of his own conscience, such an one has no further means left by which he may be convinced and brought to repentance, and therefore can never be forgiven.

From this interpretation, which is, I believe, generally admitted to be the true one, it appears that there is no just ground for the apprehensions sometimes entertained by pious and scrupulous minds, that they may *themselves* be guilty of the sin here declared to be unpardonable, the sin against the Holy Ghost; for we see that it is confined solely and exclusively to the case before us, that is, to the crime of which the Pharisees had just been guilty, the crime of attributing those miracles to the agency of evil spirits, which were plainly wrought

wrought by the Spirit of God, and which they saw with their own eyes.

What confirms this interpretation is, that this crime is here called, not as is generally supposed, the *sin* against the Holy Ghost, but *blasphemy* against the Holy Ghost, which evidently refers not to *actions* but to *words*; not to any thing *done* but to something *said* against the Holy Ghost. This being the case, it is clear that as miracles have long since ceased, and this blasphemy against the Holy Ghost relates solely to those who saw miracles performed with their own eyes, it is impossible for any one in these times to be literally guilty of this impious and unpardonable kind of blasphemy in its full extent.

Our Lord then addresses himself more directly to the authors of this spiteful calumny; "Either make the tree good and his fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt and his fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by its fruit:" that is, be uniform and consistent with yourselves. If you pretend to holiness and sincerity of heart, suffer not your mouths to utter these blasphemies; or if you persist in such behaviour, lay aside all claim to religion, with



with which this obstinate malice is as inconsistent, as it is for a tree not to discover its nature by the quality of the fruit it produces. He then adds, "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh? A good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, bringeth forth good things; and an evil man, out of the evil treasure of his heart, bringeth forth evil things." The import of which words is this: But it is impossible that *you* should speak otherwise than evil. You are a perverse and malicious generation, and the thoughts of men's hearts will of course show themselves by their words. They arise immediately from the fund within, and will necessarily discover whether it be good or bad.

Then follows another very remarkable declaration of our Lord's in the 36th verse: "I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." From hence some have imagined, that at the day of judgment we shall be called to an account, and punished for every idle and unprofitable, every trifling

trifling and ludicrous word that we have ever uttered in the gaiety of the heart during the whole course of our lives. If this be the case, how hard is it, will the enemies of the Gospel say, in the Author of your religion, to exact from you what is utterly inconsistent with the infirmities of human nature, and which must completely destroy all the freedom, all the ease, all the cheerfulness, all the comforts of social converse, and render it necessary for every man that hopes to be saved to seclude himself from society, and, like the once celebrated fathers of the order of La Trappe, impose upon themselves an everlasting silence! That this must be the consequence of the sentence here pronounced by our Lord, if it is to be understood in that strict, literal, and rigorous sense which has just been stated, and which at the first view the words seem to import, cannot be denied; and therefore we may fairly conclude, that it is not the true meaning of the passage in question; because we know that we do not serve a hard master, who requires more from us than our strength will bear; but one who can be touched with

the feeling of our infirmities, and who has declared, that "his yoke is easy, and his burthen light."

In order then to set this text of Scripture in its true light, we must look back to what had just passed; we must remember that the Pharisees had a little before reproached our Lord with having cast out devils through Beelzebub the prince of the devils; and it is *this* calumny that he alludes to in the words before us; for they are a continuation of that very same conversation which he was holding with the Jews. Now the words made use of by the Pharisees in the above mentioned charge are not merely idle, or foolish, or trifling words, they are in the highest degree malevolent, false, and wicked; they constitute one of the grossest, most detestable, and most infamous calumnies that ever was uttered by man. Consequently by *idle* words our Saviour plainly meant false, lying, and malicious words; such as those which the Pharisees had a few minutes before applied to *him*.

In confirmation of this, it should be observed, that the language then spoken by the Jews was not their primitive tongue, but one

mixed

mixed and made up of the dialects and idioms of the several nations that surrounded them, particularly of the Chaldeans, Syrians, and Arabians. In this, our Saviour delivered all his instructions, and held all his discourses. In this (as some learned men think) St. Matthew originally wrote his Gospel for the use of the Jewish converts: and it has been remarked, that in almost all the languages of which this miscellaneous one is made up, by idle or unprofitable words are meant, false, lying, malicious, and scandalous calumnies.

But though in the passage before us, the phrase of *idle words* refers more immediately to the malignant calumny of the Pharisees against Jesus; yet it certainly includes all false, slanderous, and vindictive accusations of our neighbour; all discourse which is in any respect injurious to God or man, which is contrary to truth, to decency, and evangelical purity of heart. All conversation of this sort is plainly inconsistent with the sanctity of our religion, and must of course subject us to God's displeasure here, and his judgments hereafter. And even in the literal and most obvious sense of *idle words*, though we are

not excluded from the innocent cheerfulness of social converse, yet we must beware of giving way too much to trifling, foolish, unprofitable, and unmeaning talk. Even this, when carried to excess, becomes in some degree criminal; it produces, or at least increases a frivolous turn of mind; unfits us for the discharge of any thing manly and serious; and indicates a degree of levity and thoughtlessness, not very consistent with a just sense of those important interests, which as candidates for heaven we should have constantly present to our thoughts, nor suitable to those awful prospects into eternity which the Christian revelation opens to our view, and which ought to make the most serious impressions on every sincere believer in the Gospel of Christ.

LECTURE XI.

MATTHEW xiii.

WE are now arrived at the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew, in which our blessed Lord introduces a new mode of conveying his instructions to the people. Hitherto he had confined himself entirely to the plain didactic method, of which his sermon on the mount is a large and noble specimen. But his discourses now assume a different shape, and he begins in this chapter, for the first time, to address his hearers in parables. "The same day," says the evangelist, "went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea-side; and great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship and sate; and the whole multitude stood by the shore, and he spake many things unto them in *parables*."

The word parable is sometimes used in Scripture in a large and general sense, and applied to short sententious sayings, maxims, or aphorisms, expressed in a figurative, proverbial, or even poetical manner.

But in its strict and appropriate meaning, especially as applied to our Saviour's parables, it signifies a short narrative of some event or fact, real or fictitious, in which a continued comparison is carried on between sensible and spiritual objects; and under this similitude some important doctrine, moral or religious, is conveyed and enforced.

This mode of instruction has many advantages over every other, more particularly in recommending virtue, or reproving vice.

1. In the first place, when divine and spiritual things are represented by objects well known and familiar to us, such as present themselves perpetually to our observation, in the common occurrences of life, they are much more easily comprehended, especially by rude and uncultivated minds (that is, by the great bulk of mankind) than if they were proposed in their original form.

2. In

2. In all ages of the world there is nothing with which mankind hath been so much delighted as with those little fictitious stories, which go under the name of fables or apologues among the ancient heathens, and of parables in the sacred writings. It is found by experience, that this sort of composition is better calculated to command attention, to captivate the imagination, to affect the heart, and to make deeper and more lasting impressions on the memory, than the most ingenious and most elegant discourses that the wit of man is capable of producing.

3. The very obscurity in which parables are sometimes involved, has the effect of exciting a greater degree of curiosity and interest, and of urging the mind to a more vigorous exertion of its faculties and powers, than any other mode of instruction. There is something for the understanding to work upon; and when the concealed meaning is at length elicited, we are apt to value ourselves on the discovery as the effect of our own penetration and discernment, and for that very reason to pay more regard to the moral it conveys.

4. When the mind is under the influence of strong prejudices, of violent passions or inveterate habits, and when under these circumstances it becomes necessary to rectify error, to dissipate delusion, to reprove sin, and bring the offender to a sense of his danger and his guilt; there is no way in which this difficult task can be so well executed, and the painful truths that *must* be told so successfully insinuated into the mind, as by disguising them under the veil of a well-wrought and interesting parable.

This observation cannot be better illustrated than by referring to two parables, one in the New Testament, the other in the Old, which will amply confirm the truth, and unfold the meaning of the preceding remarks.

The first of these which I allude to is the celebrated parable of the good Samaritan.

The Jews, as we learn from our Lord himself, had established it as a maxim that they were to love their neighbour and to hate their enemy*; and as they considered none as their neighbours but their own countrymen, the

* Matth. v. 43.

consequence

consequence was, that they imagined themselves at liberty to hate all the rest of the world; a liberty which they indulged without reserve, and against none with more bitterness than the contiguous nation of the Samaritans. When, therefore, the lawyer in the Gospel asked our Lord, who was his neighbour? had Christ attempted to prove to him *by argument* that he was to consider all mankind, even his enemies, even the Samaritans, as his neighbours, the lawyer would have treated his answer with contempt and disdain; all his native prejudices and absurd traditions would have risen up in arms against so offensive a doctrine; nor would all the eloquence in the world, not even the divine eloquence of the Son of God himself, have been able to subdue the deep-rooted prepossessions of the obstinate Jew.

Jesus therefore, well knowing the impossibility of convincing the lawyer by any thing *he* could say, determined to make the man convince himself, and correct his own error. With this view he relates to him the parable of the Jewish traveller, who fell among robbers, was stripped and wounded, and left half dead upon

upon the spot; and, though passed by with unfeeling indifference and neglect by his own countrymen, was at length relieved and restored to health by a compassionate Samaritan. He then asks the lawyer, who was neighbour to this distressed traveller? It was impossible for the lawyer not to answer, as he did (not foreseeing the consequence) *He that showed mercy to him*; that is, the Samaritan. Here then he at once cut up his own absurd opinion by the roots. For if the Samaritans, whom of all others the Jews most hated, were, in the true and substantial sense of the word, their *neighbours*, they were bound by their own law, by their own traditions, and by this man's own confession, to love and to assist them as such. The conclusion was therefore, *Go and do thou likewise.*

This then affords a striking proof of the efficacy of parable in correcting strong prejudices and erroneous opinions. But there is another thing still more difficult to be subdued, and that is inveterate wickedness and hardened guilt. But this too was made to give way and humble itself in the dust by the force of parable: I mean that of Nathan.

There

There seems reason to believe that King David, after he had committed the complicated crime of adultery and murder, had by some means or other contrived to lull his conscience to sleep, and to suppress the risings of any painful reflection in his mind. This appears almost incredible, yet so the fact seems to have been; and it shews in the strongest light the extreme deceitfulness of sin, its astonishing power over the mind of man, and the inveterate depravity of the human heart. When we see a man who had perpetrated such atrocious deeds, totally insensible of his guilt, and not discovering the slightest resemblance to his own case in the affecting and awakening story which the prophet related, it affords a striking and a melancholy proof what human nature is when left to itself, even in the best of men; even in those who, like King David, are, in the general tenor of their life, actuated by right principles, and even animated (as he evidently was) with the warmest sentiments of piety and devotion. And it demonstrates in the clearest manner the absolute necessity of that help from above in the discharge of our duty, which the Christian revelation holds out to us, and which

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men of the world are so apt to despise and deride as a weak delusion and fanatical imagination; I mean the divine influences of the Holy Spirit: without which there is not a single individual here present, however highly he may think of the natural rectitude and invincible integrity of his own mind, who may not in an evil hour, when he least thinks of it, be betrayed by some powerful and unexpected temptation into as much guilt, and become as blind to his own situation, as was that unhappy prince of whom we are now speaking.

It was indispensably necessary to rouse the sinner out of this dreadful lethargy; but how was this to be done? Had Nathan plainly and directly charged him with all the enormity of his guilt, the probability is, that either in the first transport of his resentment he would have driven the prophet from his presence, or that he would have attempted to palliate, to soften, to explain away his crime; would have pleaded the strength of his passion or the violence of the temptation, and perhaps claimed some indulgence of his rank and situation in life. But all these pleas were at once silenced, and his retreat completely cut off, by making him the judge

judge of his own case, and forcing his condemnation out of his own mouth. For after he had denounced death on the rich man for taking away the ewe lamb of the poor one, he could with no decency pretend that he who had destroyed the life of *one* fellow-creature, and the innocence of *another*, was deserving of a milder sentence.

There was nothing then left for him but to confess at once, as he did, "that he had sinned against the Lord;" and his penitence we know was as severe and exemplary as his crime had been atrocious.

It is much to be lamented that these indirect methods should be found necessary, in order to shew men to themselves, and acquaint them with their real characters, especially when it is their own interest not to be mistaken in so important a concern. But the wise and the virtuous in every age have condescended to make use of this innocent artifice; the necessity of which is founded in the sad corruption of human nature, and in that gross and deplorable blindness to their own sins and follies, which is observable in so large a part of mankind. They engage with warmth

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and eargerness in worldly pursuits, which employ their attention and excite their passions; so that they have little time, and less inclination, to reflect calmly and seriously on their own conduct, in a moral and religious point of view. But if their thoughts *are* at any time forced inwards, and they cannot help taking a view of themselves, a deeper source of delusion is still behind. The same actions which, when committed by others, are immediately discerned to be wrong, are palliated, explained, qualified, and apologized away, when we happen to be guilty of them ourselves. The circumstances in the two cases are discovered to be perfectly different in some essential point; our passions were ungovernable, the temptation irresistible. In short, somehow or other, all guilt vanishes away under the management of the dexterous casuist, and the intrusion of self-condemnation is effectually precluded.

Still there remains, it may be said, the admonition of some zealous friend or faithful instructor; but zeal is generally vehement, and often indiscreet. By exciting the resentment and inflaming the anger of those it means to

reform,

reform, it frequently defeats its own designs. For whoever is offended, instantly forgets his own faults, and dwells wholly upon those of his imprudent monitor. But when the veil of parable conceals for a moment from the offender that he is himself concerned in it, he may generally be surprized into a condemnation of every one that is guilty of a base dishonourable action; and when the unexpected application, *Thou art the man*, comes thundering suddenly upon him, and points out the perfect similarity of the supposed case to his own, the astonished criminal, overwhelmed with confusion, and driven from all his usual subterfuges and evasions, is compelled at length to condemn himself.

It was probably the consideration of these delusions, and the other reasons above assigned, which gave rise to so general and so ancient a custom of conveying moral instruction under the cover of imaginary agents and fictitious events. We find traces of it in the earliest writers; and it was more peculiarly cultivated in the east, the region where religion and science first took their rise. The most ancient parables perhaps on record are those

those we meet with in the Old Testament; that of Jotham, for instance, where the trees desired the bramble to reign over them*; that of Nathan†; that of the woman of Tekoah‡, in the reign of David; and that of the thistle and the cedar of Lebanon§, by Jehoash, king of Israel. From the east, this species of composition passed into Greece and Italy, and thence into the rest of Europe; and there are two celebrated writers, one in the Greek, the other in the Roman tongue, whose fables every one is acquainted with from their earliest years. These, it must be owned, are elegant, amusing, and, in a certain degree, moral and instructive: but they are not in any degree to be compared with the parables of our blessed Lord, which infinitely excel *them*, and every other composition of that species, in many essential points.

1. In the first place, the fables of the ancients are many of them of a very trivial nature, or at the best contain nothing more than maxims of mere worldly wisdom and com-

* Judges, ix. 14.
† 2 Sam. xii. 1.
‡ 2 Sam. xiv.
§ 2 Kings, xiv. 2.

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mon prudence, and sometimes perhaps a little moral instruction.

But the parables of our blessed Lord relate to subjects of the very highest importance; to the great leading principles of human conduct, to the essential duties of man, to the nature and progress of the Christian religion, to the moral government of the world, to the great distinctions between vice and virtue, to the awful scenes of eternity, to the divine influences of the Holy Spirit, to the great work of our redemption, to a resurrection and a future judgment, and the distribution of rewards and punishments in a future state; and all this expressed with a dignity of sentiment, and a simplicity of language, perfectly well suited to the grandeur of the subject.

2. In the next place, the fables of the learned heathens, though entertaining and well composed, are in general cold and dry, and calculated more to please the understanding than to touch the heart. Whereas those of our blessed Lord are most of them in the highest degree affecting and interesting. Such for instance are the parable of the lost sheep,

of the prodigal son, of the rich man and Lazarus, of the pharisee and publican, of the unforgiving servant, of the good Samaritan. There is nothing in all heathen antiquity to be compared to these; nothing that speaks so forcibly to our tenderest feelings and affections, and leaves such deep and lasting impressions upon the soul.

3dly, The Greek and Roman fables are most of them founded on improbable or impossible circumstances, and are supposed conversations between animate or inanimate beings, not endowed with the power of speech; between birds, beasts, reptiles, and trees; a circumstance which shocks the imagination, and of course weakens the force of the instruction.

Our Saviour's parables on the contrary are all of them images and allusions taken from nature, and from occurrences which are most familiar to our observation and experience in common life; and the events related are not only such as might very probably happen, but several of them are supposed to be such as actually did; and this would have the effect of a true historical narrative, which

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we all know to carry much greater weight and authority with it than the most ingenious fiction. Of the former sort, are the rich man and Lazarus, of the good Samaritan, and of the prodigal son. There are others in which our Saviour seems to allude to some historical facts which happened in those times; as that wherein it is said, that a king went into a far country, there to receive a kingdom.

This probably refers to the history of Archelăus, who, after the death of his father, Herod the Great, went to Rome to receive from Augustus the confirmation of his father's will, by which he had the kingdom of Judæa left to him.

These circumstances give a decided superiority to our Lord's parables over the fables of the ancients; and if we compare them with those of the Koran, the difference is still greater. The parables of Mahomet are trifling, uninteresting, tedious, and dull. Among other things which he has borrowed from Scripture, one is the parable of Nathan, in which he has most ingeniously contrived to destroy all its spirit, force, and beauty; and has so completely distorted and deformed its

whole texture and composition, that if the commentator had not informed you, in very gentle terms, that it is the parable of Nathan *a little disguised*, you would scarcely have known it to be the same. Such is the difference between a prophet who is really inspired, and an impostor who pretends to be so.

Nor is it only in his parables, but in his other discourses to the people, that Jesus draws his doctrines and instructions from the scenes of nature, from the objects that surrounded him, from the most common occurrences of life, from the seasons of the year, from some extraordinary incidents or remarkable transactions. "Thus, as a learned and ingenious writer has observed *, upon curing a blind man, he styles himself the light of the world, and reproves the Pharisees for their spiritual blindness and inexcusable obstinacy in refusing to be cured and enlightened by him. On little children being brought to him, he recommends the innocence, the simplicity, the meekness, the humility, the docility, of that lovely

* See Bishop Law's Considerations on the Theory of Religion.

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age, as indispensable qualifications for those that would enter into the kingdom of heaven. Beholding the flowers of the field, and the fowls of the air, he teaches his disciples to frame right and worthy notions of that Providence which supports and adorns them, and will therefore assuredly not neglect the superior order of rational beings. Observing the fruits of the earth, he instructs them to judge of men by their fruitfulness under all the means of grace. From the mention of meat and drink, he leads them to the sacred rite of eating his body and drinking his blood in a spiritual sense. From external ablutions, he deduces the necessity of purifying the heart, and cleansing the affections. Those that were fishers, he teaches to be fishers of men; to draw them by the force of argument and persuasion, aided by the influence of divine grace, to the belief and practice of true religion. Seeing the money-changers, he exhorts his disciples to lay out their several talents to the best advantage. Being among the sheep-folds, he proves himself the true shepherd of souls. Among vines, he discourses of the spiritual husbandman and vine-dresser, and draws a parallel between *his*

vineyard and the natural one. Upon the appearance of summer in the trees before him, he points out evident signs of his approaching kingdom. When the harvest comes on, he reminds his disciples of the spiritual harvest, the harvest of true believers; and exhorts them to labour diligently in that work, and add their prayers to heaven for its success. From servants being made free in the sabbatical years, he takes occasion to proclaim a nobler emancipation and more important redemption from the slavery of sin, and the bondage of corruption, by the death of Christ. From the eminence of a city standing on a hill, he turns his discourse to the conspicuous situation of his own disciples. From the temple before him, he points to that of his own body; and from Herod's unadvisedly leading out his army to meet the king of Arabia, who came against him with a superior force and defeated him, a lesson is held out to all who entered on the Christian warfare, that they should first well weigh and carefully compute the difficulties attending it, and by the grace of God resolve to surmount them.

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In the same manner, when he delivered the parable of the sower, which we find in this chapter, and which will be the next subject of our consideration, it was probably seed-time, and from the ship in which he taught he might observe the husbandmen scattering their seed upon the earth. From thence he took occasion to illustrate, by that rural and familiar image, the different effects which the doctrines of Christianity had on different men, according to the different tempers and dispositions that they happened to meet with.

"Behold, (says he,) a sower went forth to sow. And when he sowed, some fell by the way-side, and the fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth, and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth; and when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some a hundred fold, some sixty fold, some thirty fold." As our blessed Lord, soon after he had uttered this parable, ex-

plained it to his disciples, it is highly proper that you should have this explanation in his own words. "Hear ye, therefore, (says he,) the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way-side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by-and-by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns, is he that heareth the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground, is he that heareth the word and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty."

Such is the parable of the sower, and the explanation of it by our Saviour; which will furnish us with abundant matter for a great variety

variety of very important reflections. But as these cannot be distinctly stated and sufficiently enlarged upon at present, without going to a considerable length of time, and trespassing too far on that patience and indulgence which I have already but too often put to the test, I must reserve for my next Lecture the observations I have to offer on this very interesting and instructive parable.

LECTURE XII.

MATTHEW xiii. continued.

THE last Lecture concluded with a recital of the parable of the sower, and our Lord's explanation of it; and I now proceed to lay before you those reflections which it has suggested to my mind.

In the first place then it must be observed, that this parable, like many others, is prophetic as well as instructive; it predicts the fate of the Christian religion in the world, and the different sorts of reception it will meet with from different men. And as this prediction is completely verified by the present state of religion, as we see it at this hour existing among ourselves, it affords one very decisive proof of Christ's power of foreseeing future events, and of course tends strongly to establish

establish the truth of his pretensions, and the divine authority of his religion.

In the next place, it is evident that there are four different classes of men here described, which comprehend all the different religious or irreligious characters that are to be met with in the world. The first consists of those "that hear the word of the kingdom (as our Lord expresses it) and understand it not; then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in their hearts. These are they, (says he,) which received seed by the way-side." By these are meant those persons whose minds, like the beaten high road, are hard and impenetrable, and inaccessible to conviction. Of these, we all know there are too many in the world; some who have imbibed early and deep-rooted prejudices against Christianity; who either conceiving themselves superior to the rest of mankind in genius, knowledge, and penetration, reject with scorn whatever the bulk of mankind receives with veneration, and erect favourite systems of their own, which they conceive to be the very perfection of human wisdom; or, on the other hand, having been

been unfortunately very early initiated in the writings of modern philosophists, implicitely adopt the opinions of those whom they consider as the great luminaries and oracles of the age, receive ridicule as argument, and assertion as proof, and prefer the silly witticisms, the specious sophistry, the metaphysical subtlety, the coarse buffoonery, which distinguish many of the most popular opponents of our faith, to the simplicity, dignity, and sublimity of the divine truths of the Gospel. These are the professed infidels, or, as they choose to style themselves, the disciples of philosophy and reason, and the enemies of priestcraft, fanaticism, and superstition.

But besides these, there is another description of men, on whom the good seed makes little or no impression; these are the thoughtless, the inattentive, the inconsiderate, the trifling, the gay, who think of nothing beyond the present scene, and who do not consider themselves as in the smallest degree interested in any thing else. These men, without professing themselves unbelievers, without formally and explicitly rejecting the Gospel, yet do in fact never concern themselves about it. It

forms no part of their system, it does not at all enter into their plans of life. The former sort above described are infidels on principle; these are practical infidels, without any principle at all. Being born of Christian parents, and instructed perhaps in the first rudiments of Christianity, they call themselves Christians; they attend divine service, they repeat their prayers, they listen to the discourses of the preacher, they make no objections to what they hear, they question not the propriety of what they are taught; but here their religion ends; it never goes beyond the surface, it never penetrates into their hearts, *it lies on the hard beaten highway.* The instant they leave the church, every idea of religion vanishes out of their thoughts; they never reflect for one moment on what they have heard; they never consider the infinite importance of what is to happen after death; the awful prospects of eternity never present themselves to their minds, neither excite their hopes nor alarm their fears. "With their mouths indeed they confess the Lord Jesus, but they do not believe with their hearts unto salvation:" and although perhaps in the wide

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waste of a trifling insignificant life, a few worthy actions or a few solitary virtues appear, yet their affections are not set on things above, their hopes are not centered there, their views do not tend there; their treasure is on earth, and there is their heart also.

These two characters, the hardened unbeliever, and the mere nominal Christian, constitute the first class described by our Saviour in the parable of the sower. These are they which receive the seed by the way-side, where it lies neglected upon the surface, till "the fowls of the air devour it, or the wicked one catcheth it out of their hearts;" and there is an end at once of all their hopes of salvation, perhaps for ever.

Secondly, There is another sort of soil mentioned in the parable, which gives the seed at first a more favourable reception. When it falls on stony ground, it finds no great difficulty in gaining admission into a little loose earth scattered upon a rock; it springs up with amazing rapidity; but no sooner "does the sun rise upon it with its scorching heat, than it withers away for want of depth of earth, root, and moisture."

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What a lively representation is this of weak and unstable Christians! They receive Christianity at first with gladness; they are extremely ready to be made eternally happy, and suppose that they have nothing else to do but to repeat their creed, and take possession of heaven. But when they find that there are certain conditions to be performed on *their* parts also; that they must give up their favourite interests and restrain their strongest passions, must sometimes even pluck out a right eye or tear off a right arm; that they must take up their cross and follow a crucified Saviour through many difficulties, distresses, and persecutions; their ardour and alacrity are instantly extinguished. They want strength of mind, soundness of principle, and sincerity of faith, to support them. No wonder then that they fall away and depart from their allegiance to their divine Master and Redeemer. This is the second sort of hearers described in the parable, "that receive the word at first with joy; but having no root in themselves, when tribulation and persecution arise because of the word, by-and-by they are offended." This refers more immediately

mediately to the first disciples and first preachers of the Gospel, who were exposed, in the discharge of their high office, to the severest trials, and the cruellest persecutions from their numerous and powerful enemies. Some of them undoubtedly, who had not sufficient root in themselves, gave way to the storms that assailed them, and made shipwreck of their faith, as our Lord here foretels that they would. But others, we know, stood firm and unmoved, amidst the most tremendous dangers, and underwent, with unparelleled fortitude, the most excruciating torments. The description which the writer to the Hebrews gives of the saints and prophets of old, may, with the strictest truth, be applied to the apostles and their successors in the first ages of the Gospel, under the various persecutions to which they were exposed. "They had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea moreover of bonds and imprisonments. They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword, were destitute, afflicted, tormented*." All these barbarities they endured with unshaken patience

* Heb. xi. 37.

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and firmness, and thereby bore the strongest possible testimony, not only to their own sincerity, but to the divine and miraculous influence of the religion which they taught. For it is justly and forcibly observed by the excellent Mr. Addison, that the astonishing and unexampled fortitude which was shewn by innumerable multitudes of Martyrs, in those slow and painful torments that were inflicted on them, is nothing less than *a standing miracle* during the three first centuries. "I cannot, says he, conceive a man placed in the burning iron chair of Lyons, amidst the insults and mockeries of a crowded amphitheatre, and still keeping his seat; or stretched upon a grate of iron over an intense fire, and breathing out his soul amidst the exquisite sufferings of such a tedious execution, rather than renounce his religion, or blaspheme his Saviour, without supposing something supernatural. Such trials seem to me above the strength of human nature, and able to overbear duty, reason, faith, conviction, nay, and the most absolute certainty of a future state. We can easily imagine that a few persons in so good a cause might have laid down their

lives at the gibbet, the stake, or the block but that *multitudes* of each sex, of every age of different countries and conditions, should, for nearly three hundred years together, expire leisurely amidst the most exquisite tortures, rather than apostatize from the truth, has something in it so far beyond the natural strength and force of mortals, that one cannot but conclude there was some miraculous power to support the sufferers; and if so, here is at once a proof, from history and from fact, of the divine origin of our religion*."

There is a third portion of the seed, that falls among thorns. This wants neither root nor depth of earth. It grows up; but the misfortune is, that the thorns grow up with it. The fault of the soil is not that of bearing nothing, but of bearing too much; of bearing what it ought not, of exhausting its strength and nutrition on vile and worthless productions, which choke the good seed, and prevent it from coming to perfection. "These are they, (says our Saviour, in the parallel place of St. Luke,) which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares, and riches,

* Addison's Evidences, S. 7.

and

and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection." In their youth perhaps they receive religious instruction, they imbibe right principles, and listen to good advice: but no sooner do they *go forth*, no sooner do they leave those persons and those places from whom they receive them, than they take the road either of business or of pleasure, pursue their interests, their amusements, or their guilty indulgences with unbounded eagerness, and have neither time nor inclination to cultivate the seeds of religion that have been sown in their hearts, and to eradicate the weeds that have been mingled with them. The consequence is, that the weeds prevail, and the seeds are choked and lost.

Can there possibly be a more faithful picture of a large proportion of the Christian world? Let us look around us, and observe how the greater part of those we meet with are employed. In what is it that their thoughts are busied, their views, their hopes, and their fears centered, their attention occupied, their hearts and souls and affections engaged? Is it in searching the Scriptures, in meditating on its doctrines, its precepts, its

exhortations, its promises, and its threats? Is it in communing with their own hearts, in probing them to the very bottom, in looking carefully whether there be any way of wickedness in them, in plucking out every noxious weed, and leaving room for the good seed to grow and swell and expand itself, and bring forth fruit to perfection? Is it in cultivating purity of manners, a spirit of charity towards the whole human race, and the most exalted sentiments of piety, gratitude, and love towards their Maker and Redeemer? These I fear are far from being the general and principal occupations of mankind. Too many of them are, God knows, very differently employed. They are overwhelmed with business, they are devoted to amusement, they are immersed in sensuality, they are mad with ambition, they are idolaters of wealth, of power, of glory, of fame. On these things all their affections are fixed. These are the great objects of their pursuit; and if any accidental thought of religion happens to cross their way, they instantly dismiss the unbidden, unwelcome guest, with the answer of Felix to Paul, "Go thy way for this time; when we have a convenient season, we will send for thee."

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But how then, it is said, are we to conduct ourselves? If Providence has blessed us with riches, with honour, with power, with reputation, are we to reject these gifts of our heavenly Father; or ought we not rather to accept them with thankfulness, and enjoy with gratitude, the advantages and the comforts which his bounty has bestowed upon us? Most assuredly we ought. But then they are to be enjoyed also with innocence, with temperance, and with moderation. They must not be allowed to usurp the first place in our hearts. They must not be permitted to supplant God in our affection, or to dispute that pre-eminence and priority which he claims over every propensity of our nature. This, and this only, can prevent the good seed from being choked with the cares, the riches, and the pleasures of the present life.

We now come in the last place to the seed which fell on good ground, which our Lord tells us, in St. Luke, denotes those that in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience, some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty.

We here see that the first and principal qualification for hearing the word of God, for keeping it, for rendering it capable of bringing forth fruit, is *an honest and a good heart*; that is, a heart free from all those evil dispositions and corrupt passions which blind the eyes, distort the understanding, and obstruct the admission of divine truth; a heart perfectly clear from prejudice, from pride, from vanity, from self-sufficiency, and self-conceit; a heart sincerely disposed and earnestly desirous to find out the truth, and firmly resolved to embrace it when found; ready to acknowledge its own ignorance, weakness, and corruption, and "to receive with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save the soul."

This is that innocence and simplicity and singleness of mind, which we find so frequently recommended and so highly applauded by our blessed Lord, and which is so beautifully and feelingly described when young children were brought to him that he should touch them, and were checked by his disciples. "Suffer the little children to come unto me, (says he,) and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God;" and then he adds, "Whosoever

soever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein*." Here, in a few words, and by a most significant and affecting emblem, is expressed that temper and disposition of mind which is the most essential qualification for the kingdom of heaven. Unless we come to the Gospel with that meekness, gentleness, docility, and guileless simplicity, which constitute the character of a child, and render him so lovely and captivating, we cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven; we cannot either assent to the evidence, believe the doctrines, or obey the precepts of the Christian religion. Hence we see the true reason why so many men of distinguished talents have rejected the religion of Christ. It is not because its evidences are defective, or its doctrines repugnant to reason; it is because their dispositions were the very reverse of what the Gospel requires; because (as their writings evidently show) they were high-spirited, violent, proud, conceited, vain, disdainful, and sometimes profligate too; because, in short, they wanted that honest and good heart, which not only receives the good

* Mark, x. 14, 15.

seed, but keeps it, and nourishes it with unceasing patience, till it bring forth fruit to perfection. They could not enter in to the marriage feast because they had not on the wedding garment, because they were not *clothed with humility**. For, "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble. Them that are meek, shall he guide in judgment; and such as are gentle, them shall he learn his way†."

But here arises a difficulty on which the enemies of our faith lay great stress, and frequently allege as an excuse for their infidelity and impiety. If, say they, the success of the good seed depends on the soil in which it is sown, the success of the Gospel must, in the same manner, depend (as this very parable is meant to prove) on the temper and disposition of the recipient, of the person to whom it is offered. Now this temper and disposition are not of our own making; they are the work of nature; they are what our Creator has given us. If then, in any particular instance, they are unfortunately such as disqualify us for the reception of the Gospel, the fault is not ours;

* 2 Pet. v. 5. † James, iv. 6. Psalm xxv. 9.

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it is in the soil, it is in our natural constitution, for which surely we cannot be held responsible.

This plea is specious and plausible; but it is nothing more. The fact is, that the imbecility and corruption introduced into our moral frame by the fall of our first parents, is in some measure felt by all; but undoubtedly in different individuals shows itself in different degrees, and *that* from their very earliest years. Look at any large family of children living together under the eye of their parents, and you will frequently discover in them a surprising variety of tempers, humours, and dispositions; and although the same instructions are given to all, the same care and attention, the same discipline, the same vigilance exercised over each, yet some shall be, in their general conduct, meek, gentle, and submissive; others impetuous, passionate, and froward; some active, enterprizing, and bold; others quiet, contented, and calm; some cunning, artful, and close; others open, frank, and ingenuous; some, in short, malevolent, mischievous, and unfeeling; others kind, compassionate, good-natured, and though sometimes betraying the infirmity

infirmity of human nature by casual omissions of duty and errors of conduct, yet soon made sensible of their faults, and easily led back to regularity, order, piety, and virtue.

Here then is unquestionably the difference of natural constitution contended for. But what is the true inference? Is it that those whose dispositions are the worst are to give themselves up for lost, are to abandon all hopes of salvation, and to allege their depraved nature as a sufficient apology for infidelity or vice, as constituting a complete inability either to believe or to obey the Gospel? No such thing. On the contrary, it is a strong and powerful call, first upon their parents and the guides of their youth, and afterwards upon themselves, to watch over, to restrain, to correct, to amend, to meliorate their evil dispositions, and to supply, by attention, by discipline, and by prayer, what has been denied by nature. It may be thought hard, perhaps, that all this care, and labour, and painful conflict, should be necessary to some, and not (in the same degree at least) to others; and that so marked a distinction in so important a point should

should be made between creatures of the same species. But is not the same distinction made in other points of importance? Are not men placed from their very birth by the hand of Providence in different situations of rank, power, wealth? Are not some indulged with every advantage, every blessing that their hearts can wish, and others sunk in obscurity, penury, and wretchedness? Are not some favoured with the most splendid talents and capacities for acquiring knowledge; others slow in conception, weak in understanding, and almost impenetrable to instruction? Are not some blessed from their birth with strong, healthy, robust constitutions, subject to no infirmities, no diseases; others weak, sickly, tender, liable to perpetual disorders, and with the utmost difficulty dragging on a precarious existence? Yet does this preclude all these different individuals from improving their condition; does it prevent the lowest member of society from endeavouring to raise himself into a superior class; does it prevent the most indigent from labouring to acquire a fortune by industry, frugality, and activity; does it prevent

vent the most ignorant from cultivating their minds, and furnishing them with some degree of knowledge; does it prevent those of the tenderest and most delicate frames from strengthening, confirming, and invigorating their health, by management, by medicine, and by temperance? We see the contrary every day; we see all these different characters succeeding in their efforts beyond their most sanguine expectations, and rising to a degree of opulence, of rank, of power, of learning, and of health, of which at their outset they could not have formed the most distant idea. And why then are we not to act in the same manner with regard to our natural tempers, dispositions, propensities, and inclinations? Why are we not to suppose *them* as capable of improvement and melioration as our condition, our fortune, our intellectual powers, and our bodily health? Why are we to allege impossibility in one case more than in the others? The truth is, that a bad constitution of mind as well as of body may, by proper care and attention, and the powerful influences of the Holy Spirit, be greatly, if not wholly, amended. And as it sometime happens

pens that they who have the weakest and most distempered frames, by means of an exact regimen and an unshaken perseverance in rule and method, outlive those of a robuster make and more luxuriant health; so there are abundant instances where men of the most perverse dispositions and most depraved turn of mind, by keeping a steady guard upon their weak parts, and gradually, but continually, correcting their defects, applying earnestly for assistance from above, going on from strength to strength, and from one degree of perfection to another, have at length arrived at a higher pitch of virtue than those for whom nature had done much more, and who would therefore do but little for themselves.

Let us then never despair. If we have not from constitution that honest and good heart which is necessary for receiving the good seed, and bringing forth fruit with patience, we may by degrees, and by the blessing of God, gradually acquire it. If the soil is not originally good, it may be made so by labour and cultivation; but above all, by imploring our heavenly Father to shower down upon it the plentiful

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tiful effusions of his grace, which he has promised to all that devoutly and fervently and constantly pray for it. This dew from heaven, "shed abroad in our hearts *," will refresh and invigorate and purify our souls; will correct the very worst disposition; will soften and subdue the hardest and most ungrateful soil, will make it clean and pure and moist, fit for the reception of the good seed; and notwithstanding its original poverty and barrenness, will enrich it with strength and vigour sufficient to bring forth fruit to perfection.

I have now finished these Lectures for the present year, and must, on this occasion, again entreat you to let those truths, to which you have listened with so much patience and perseverance, take entire possession of your hearts. They are not vain, they are not trivial things, they are the words of eternal life; they relate to the most important of all human concerns, to the most essential interests and comfort of the present life, and to the destiny, the eternal destiny of happiness or misery that awaits you in the next.

* Rom. v. 5.

You

You have just heard the parable of the sower explained, and it behoves you to consider in which of the four classes of men there described you can fairly rank yourselves. Are you in the number of those that receive the seed by the way-side, on hearts as impenetrable and inaccessible to conviction as the hard beaten high road? or of those that receive the seed on a little loose earth scattered on a rock, where it quickly springs up, and as quickly withers away? or of those in whom the seed is choked with thorns, with the occupations and pleasures of this life? or, lastly, of those who receive the seed on good ground, on an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty? It becomes every one of you to ask yourselves this question very seriously, and to answer it very honestly; for on that depends the whole colour of your future condition here and hereafter.

There are none I trust here present, there are few I believe in this country, who fall under the first description of professed and hardened unbelievers; and amidst many painful circumstances of these awful and anxious times

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it is some consolation to us to reflect, that the incredible pains which have been taken in a multitude of vile publications to induce the people of this country to apostatize from their religion, have not made that general and permanent impression on their minds which might naturally have been expected from such malignant and reiterated efforts to shake their principles and subvert their faith. But there are other instruments of perversion and corruption, much more formidable and more powerful than these. There are rank and noxious weeds and thorns, which grow up with the good seed and choke it, and prevent it from coming to maturity. These are, as the parable tells us, the cares, the riches, and the pleasures of this world, which in our passage through life lay hold upon our hearts, and are more dangerous obstructions to the Gospel than all the speculative arguments and specious sophistry of all its adversaries put together. It is but seldom, I believe, comparatively speaking, that men are fairly reasoned out of their religion. But they are very frequently seduced, both from the practice

practice and the belief of it, by treacherous passions within and violent temptations from without, by "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life." These are in fact the most common, the most powerful enemies of our faith. These are the weeds and the thorns that twist themselves round every fibre of our hearts, which impede the growth and destroy the fruitfulness of every good principle that has been implanted there, and form that third and most numerous class of hearers described in the parable of the sower, who, though not professed infidels, are yet practical unbelievers, and who, though they retain the form, have lost all the substance, all the power, all the life and soul of religion.

It is then against these most dangerous corruptors of our fidelity and allegiance to our heavenly Master, that we must principally be upon our guard; it is against these we must arm and prepare our souls, by summoning all our fortitude and resolution, and calling in to our aid all those spiritual succours which the power of prayer can draw down upon us from above. It was to assist us in this arduous conflict that the compilers of our liturgy ap-

pointed the season of Lent, and more particularly the offices of the concluding week, which, from the sufferings of our Saviour at that time, we call *Passion week*. It was thought, and surely it was wisely thought, by our ancestors, that to fortify ourselves against the attractions of the world, and the seductions of sin, it was necessary to withdraw ourselves sometimes from the tumultuous and intoxicating scenes of business and of pleasure, which, in the daily commerce of life, press so close on every side of us; and to strengthen and confirm our minds against their fatal influence, by retirement, by recollection, by self-communion, by self-examination, by meditating on the word of God, and, above all, by frequent and fervent prayer. To give us time for these sacred occupations, a small portion of every year has been judiciously set apart for them by our church: and what time could be so proper for those holy purposes, as that in which our blessed Lord was suffering so much for our sakes? I allude more particularly to that solemn week which is now approaching, and to which I must beg to call the most serious attention of every one here present.

In that week all public diversions are, as you well know, wisely prohibited by public authority; and in conformity to the spirit of such prohibition, we should, even in our own families and in our own private amusements, be temperate, modest, decorous, and discreet. Think not, however, that I am here recommending gloom and melancholy, and seclusion from all society; far from it. This could answer no other purpose but to sour your minds and to deaden your devotions. The cheerfulness of social converse and friendly intercourse is by no means inconsistent with the duties of the week; but all those tumultuous assemblies, which are too strongly marked with an air of levity, gaiety, and dissipation, and may in fact be ranked in the number of *public* diversions, are plainly repugnant to that seriousness and tenderness of mind, which the aweful and interesting events of that week must naturally inspire. Let me only request you to read over, when you return home, that plain, simple, unaffected, yet touching narrative of our Saviour's sufferings, which is selected from the Gospels, in the daily offices of the next week; and then ask your own

hearts whether, at the very time when your Redeemer is supposed to have passed through all those dreadful scenes for your sakes and for your salvation, from his first agony in the garden, to his last expiring groan upon the cross, whether at this very time you can bring yourselves to pursue the pleasures, the vanities, and the follies of the world, with the same unqualified eagerness and unabated ardour as if nothing had happened which had given him the slightest pain, or in which you had the smallest interest or concern. Your hearts, I am sure, will revolt at the very idea, and your own feelings will preserve you from thus wantonly sporting with the cross of Christ. And if to a prudent abstinence from these things you were to add a careful inquiry into your past conduct, and the present state of your souls, if you were to extend your views to another world, and consider what your condition there is likely to be; what reasonable grounds you have to hope for a favourable sentence from your Almighty Judge; how far you have conformed to the commands of your Maker, and what degree of affection and gratitude

titude you have manifested for the inexpressible kindness of your Redeemer; this surely would be an employment not inconsistent with your necessary occupations, and not unsuitable to the humble candidates for pardon, acceptance, and immortal happiness.

Is this too great a burthen to be imposed upon us for a few days; is it too great a sacrifice of our time, our thoughts, and our amusements, to an invisible world and a reversionary inheritance of inestimable value? It certainly is, if the Gospel be all a fabricated tale. But if it contain the words of soberness and truth; if its divine authority is established by such an accumulation of evidence of various kinds as never before concurred to prove any other facts or events in the history of the world, by evidences springing from different sources, yet all centering in the same point, and converging to the same conclusion; if even the few incidental proofs that have been offered to your consideration in the course of these Lectures have produced that conviction in your minds which they seem to have done; what then is the consequence? Is it not that truths of such infinite importance

well deserve all that consideration for which I am now contending; and that we ought to embrace with eagerness every appointed means and every favourable opportunity that is thrown in our way, of demonstrating our attachment and our gratitude to a crucified Saviour, who died for our sins, and rose again for our justification, and will come once more in glory to judge the world in righteousness, and to distribute his rewards and punishments to all the nations of the earth assembled before him? At that aweful tribunal may we all appear with a humble confidence in the merits of our Redeemer, and a trembling hope of that mercy which he has promised to every sincere believer, every truly contrite and penitent offender!

LECTURE XIII.

MATTHEW xiii. continued.

THE Lectures of the last year concluded with an explanation of the parable of the sower; and immediately after this follows in the Gospel the parable of the tares, which will be the subject of our present consideration *.

The parable is as follows: "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field; from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this.

* Matth. xiii. 24.

The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said Nay, lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together unto the harvest; and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them up in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."

After our Lord had delivered this parable, and one or two more very short ones, we are told that he sent the multitude away, and went into the house; and his disciples came unto him, saying, "Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field. He answered and said unto them, He that sowed the good seed is the Son of man. The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom, but the tares are the children of the wicked one. The enemy that sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world, and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels,

angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father: who hath ears to hear let him hear."

This parable well deserves our most serious consideration, as it gives an answer to two questions of great curiosity and great importance, which have exercised the ingenuity and agitated the minds of thinking men from the earliest times to the present, and perhaps were never, at any period of the world, more interesting than at this very hour.

The first of these questions is, How came moral evil into the world?

The next is, Why is it suffered to remain a single moment; and why is not every wicked man immediately punished as he deserves?

The first of these questions has, we know, in almost all ages, and in all countries, been a constant subject of investigation and controversy among metaphysicians and theologians, and has given birth to an infinity of fanciful theories and systems, to one more particularly

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in our own times, by a man of very distinguished talents*; all which however have failed of solving the difficulty, and have proved nothing more than this mortifying and humiliating truth, namely, the extreme weakness of the human intellect, when applied to subjects so far above its reach, and the utter inability of man to fathom the counsels of the Most High, and to develop the mysterious ways of his providence, by the sole strength of unassisted reason†. That those who were never favoured with the light of revelation should indulge themselves in such abstruse speculations, can be no great wonder; but that they who have access to the original fountain of truth, and can draw from that sacred source the most authentic information on this point,

* Soame Jenyns.

† Among the dissertations of Plutarch (which go by the name of his morals), there is a very curious and ingenious one, intituled περὶ τῶν ὑπὸ τῆ Θείου βραδέως τιμωρουμένων, concerning those whom the Deity is slow in punishing. In this, among other just remarks, he observes, "that many things which great generals, and legislators, and statesmen do, are to common observers incomprehensible. What wonder is it then, (says he,) if we cannot understand why the gods inflict punishment on the wicked, sometimes at an earlier, sometimes at a later period? Plut. Ed. Xyland. v. 2. p. 549. F.

should

should have recourse to the fallible conjectures of human ingenuity, and should hew out to themselves "cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water," is a most unaccountable error of judgment, and a strange misapplication of talents, and waste of labour and of time. We are told in the very beginning of the Bible, that he who first brought sin or moral evil into the world, was that great adversary of the human race, the devil, who first tempted the woman, and she the man, to act in direct contradiction to the commands of their Maker.

This act of disobedience destroyed at once that innocence and purity and integrity of mind, with which they came out of the hands of their Creator; gave an immediate and dreadful shock to their whole moral frame, and introduced into it all those corrupt propensities and disordered passions which they bequeathed as a fatal legacy to their descendants; of which we all now feel the bitter fruits, and have, I fear, by our own personal and voluntary transgressions, not a little improved the wretched inheritance we received from our ancestors. This is the true origin of moral

moral evil; and it is expressly confirmed by our Saviour in the parable before us: in which when the servants of the householder express their surprise at finding tares among the wheat, and ask whence they came, his answer is, *An enemy hath done this*; and that enemy, our Lord informs us, is the devil; that inveterate, implacable enemy (as the very name of Satan imports) of the human race, the original author of all our calamities, and at this moment the prime mover and great mainspring of all the wickedness and all the misery that now overwhelm the world.

To this account great objections have been made, and no small pains taken to confute, to expose, and to ridicule it. But after all the wit and buffoonery which have been lavished upon it, it may safely be affirmed, and might easily be shown, that it stands on firmer ground, and is incumbered with fewer difficulties, than any other hypothesis that has been yet proposed.

But still, as I have already observed, there remains another very important question to be answered. Why is the wickedness of man, from whatever source it springs, suffered

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to pass unobserved and unpunished by the Judge of all the earth? Why is not the bold offender stopped short in his career of vice and iniquity? Why is he permitted to go on triumphantly, without any obstacle to his wishes, to insult, oppress, and harass the virtuous and the good, without the least check or control, and, as it were, to brave the vengeance of the Almighty, and set at nought the great Governor of the world? Why, in short, in the language of the parable, are the tares allowed to grow up unmolested with the wheat, to choke its vigour, and impede its growth? Why are they not plucked up instantly with an indignant hand, and thrown to the dunghill, or committed to the flames?

This has been a most grievous "stumbling stone, a rock of offence," not only to the unthinking crowd, but to men of serious thought and reflection in every age; and scarce any thing has more perplexed and disturbed the minds of the good, or given more encouragement or audacity to the bad, than the little notice that seems to be taken of the most enormous crimes, and the little distinction that is apparently made between "the wheat and the

the tares, between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God, and him that serveth him not."

The reflections which these mysterious proceedings are apt to excite even in the best and humblest of men, are most inimitably expressed by the royal Psalmist in the 73d Psalm; where you see all the different turns and workings of his mind laid open without disguise, and all the various ideas and sentiments that successively took possession of his soul in the progress of his inquiry, described in the most natural and affecting manner. "Truly, (says he, with that piety which constantly inspires him,) God is loving to Israel; even unto such as are of a clean heart: nevertheless my feet were almost gone; my treadings had well nigh slipped. And why? I was grieved at the wicked; I do also see the ungodly in such prosperity. For they are in no peril of death, but are lusty and strong. They come in no misfortune like other folk; neither are they plagued like other men. And this is the cause, that they are so holden with pride, and overwhelmed with cruelty. Their eyes swell with fatness, and they do even what they lust. They

They corrupt other, and speak of wicked blasphemy; their talking is against the Most High. Tush, say they, how should God perceive it; is there knowledge in the Most High? Lo, these are the ungodly. These prosper in the world, and these have riches in possession. And I said, then I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency."

Sentiments such as these, are, I believe, what many good men have found occasionally rising in their minds, on observing the prosperity of the worthless part of mankind. But never were they before so beautifully and so feelingly expressed as in this passage. These complaints, however, soon pass away with men of pious dispositions, and end in meek submission to the will of Heaven. But not so with the wicked and profane. By them the forbearance of Heaven towards sinners is sometimes perverted to the very worst purposes, and made use of as an argument to encourage and confirm them in the career of vice. This effect is well and accurately described in the book of Ecclesiastes. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the

the hearts of the sons of men are fully set in them to do evil*."

It was to obviate these fatal consequences, as well as to give support and consolation to the good, that our Lord delivered this parable of the tares and the wheat; which will enable us to solve the arduous question above-mentioned, arising from the impunity and prosperity of the wicked, and to vindicate in this instance the ways of God to man.

But before I begin to state and explain the reasons of that forbearance and lenity towards sinners, which is so much objected to in the divine administration of the world, I must take notice of one very material circumstance in the case, which is, that the evil complained of is greatly magnified, and represented to be much more generally prevalent than it really is. The fact is, that although punishment does not *always* overtake the wicked in this life, yet it falls upon them more frequently and heavily than we are aware of. They are often punished when we do not observe it; but they are also sometimes punished in the most public and conspicuous manner.

* Eccles. viii. 11.

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The very first offence committed by man after the creation of the world was, as we know to our cost, followed by immediate and exemplary punishment. The next great criminal, Cain, was rendered a fugitive and a vagabond upon earth, and held up as an object of execration and abhorrence to mankind. When the whole earth was sunk in wickedness, it was overwhelmed by a deluge. The abominations of Sodom and Gomorrah were avenged by fire from heaven. The tyrant Pharaoh and his host were drowned in the Red Sea. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and their rebellious companions, were buried alive in the bowels of the earth. It was for their portentous wickedness and savage practices that the Canaanite nations were exterminated by the Israelites; and it was for their idolatries, their licentiousness, and their rebellions against God, that the Israelites themselves were repeatedly driven into exile, reduced to slavery, and at length their city, their temple, and their whole civil polity, utterly destroyed, and themselves scattered and dispersed over every part of the known world, and every where treated with derision and contempt. It will be said,

perhaps, that these were the consequences of the peculiar theocratic form of their government, under which the rewards and the punishments were temporal and immediate, and that they are not to be expected in the present state of human affairs. Still however they are proofs, and tremendous proofs, that God is not an inattentive and unconcerned spectator of human wickedness. But let us come to our own times, and to the fates and fortunes of individuals under our own observation. Do we not continually see that they who indulge their passions without control, and give an unbounded loose to every corrupt propensity of their hearts, are sooner or later the victims of their own intemperance and licentiousness? Do they not madly sacrifice to the love of pleasure, and frequently within a very short space of time, their health, their fortune, their characters, their peace of mind, and that too completely and effectually, and beyond all hopes of recovery? The instances of this are many and dreadful, without taking into the account such flagrant crimes as deliver men over into the hands of public justice. Now what is all this but the sentence of God

speedily

speedily executed against evil works? It may be alleged, that these are only the natural consequences of wrong conduct, and not the immediate judicial inflictions of Heaven. But who is it that has made these evils the natural consequences of vice? who but the great Author of nature? He hath purposely formed his world and his creature man in such a manner, that these penalties shall follow close upon wickedness, as a *present* mark of his abhorrence and detestation of it; and they fall on many offenders, both so speedily and so heavily, that till second thoughts correct the first impression, it seems almost an impeachment of his goodness that he inflicts them.

Still it must be confessed that wickedness is sometimes triumphant; and so also does folly sometimes meet with success in the world; but it is true notwithstanding, that it labours under great disadvantages, and immoral conduct under still greater. The *natural* tendency of sin is to misery. Accidents may now and then prevent this, but not generally; art and cunning may evade it, but not nearly so often as men imagine.

But supposing the guilty to escape for a time all sufferings, and, in consequence of it, to please themselves highly with the prudence of their choice; yet still punishment, though slow, may overtake them at last. The blindness of such men to consequences is quite astonishing. One man evades the penalties of human laws in a few instances, and therefore concludes he shall never be overtaken by them. Another preserves his reputation for a time, and thence imagines it to be perfectly secure. A third finds his health hold out a few years, and therefore has not the least suspicion that what he is always undermining must fall at last.

Now each of these may, if he pleases, applaud his own wisdom; but every one else must see his extreme stupidity and folly. In fact, whoever commits sin has swallowed poison, which from that moment begins to operate; at first perhaps by a pleasing intoxication, afterwards by slow and uncertain degrees, but still the disease is within, and is mortal; and since, it may every instant break out with fatal violence, it is a melancholy thing to see

the person infected filled with a mad joy, which must end in heaviness and death.

Vice, especially of some sorts, affects to wear a smiling countenance, and the days that are spent in it pass along for a time pleasantly enough; but little do the poor wretches that are deluded by it reflect what bitterness they are treasuring up for the rest of life, and how soon they may come to taste it in such consequences, as even the completest reformation, and the strictest care afterwards, will very imperfectly either prevent or cure.

After all, however, it must be acknowledged, that there are numbers of worthless and profligate men, who go on for a considerable length of time, perhaps even to the end of their days, in a full tide of worldly prosperity, blessed with every thing that is thought most valuable in this life, wealth, power, rank, health, and strength, and enjoying all these advantages without interruption and alloy, "coming in no misfortune like other folk, and not plagued or afflicted like other men."

These, it must be confessed, are strong symptoms of happiness, if we are to judge from appearances only. But does not every one know that happiness depends infinitely

less upon external circumstances than on the internal comfort, content, and satisfaction of the mind? May I not appeal to every one here present, whether some of the acutest sufferings, and the most exquisite joys he has experienced, are not those which are confined to his own breast, which he enjoys in secrecy and in silence, in his retired and private moments, unobserved by the world, and independent on all exterior show? "The heart only (says the wise man most truly) knoweth its own bitterness, and a stranger doth not intermeddle with its joy*." This then is the standard by which you must measure human happiness. You must not too hastily conclude that prosperity is felicity. In order to know whether these men are truly what they seem to be, you must follow them into their retirements, into their closets, and to their couches; and if you could then see the interior of their hearts, you would probably find them objects rather of pity than of envy. Whatever they may pretend, or whatever air of cheerfulness they may assume, it is utterly impossible that they, whose sole object is to gratify their passions without the least regard to the feelings of

* Prov. xiv. 10.

others;

others; who are corrupting all around them by their conversation and their example, or spreading ruin, misery, and desolation over the world by their inordinate ambition; who not only live in a constant violation of the commands of their Maker, but perhaps even deny his existence, renounce his authority, and treat every thing serious and religious with derision and contempt: it is, I say, utterly impossible that these men, whatever external magnificence or gaiety may surround them, can enjoy that peace and comfort and content of mind which alone constitutes real and substantial happiness, and without which every thing else is insipid and unsatisfactory. A secret consciousness that they are acting wrong, that they are degrading and debasing their nature, and wasting their time in mean, unworthy, and mischievous pursuits; frequent pangs of remorse for the irreparable injuries they have done to those whom they have betrayed or oppressed, and whose peace and comfort they have for ever destroyed; a dread of that Almighty Being whom they have resisted and insulted; a fear of death, and an apprehension of that punishment hereafter,

which, though they affect to disbelieve and despise, they cannot help knowing to be possible, and feeling that they deserve; all these reflections, which, in spite of their utmost efforts to stifle them, will very often force themselves upon their minds, are sufficient to counteract every other advantage they possess, and to embitter every enjoyment of their lives. All shall look outwardly gay and happy, and all within shall be joyless and gloomy. They shall seem to have every thing they wish, and, in fact, have nothing that affords them any genuine satisfaction, or preserves them from the internal wretchedness that perpetually haunts them. "God (as the Psalmist expresses it) gives them their hearts desire, and sends *leanness* withal into their souls *;" that is, a total incapacity of deriving any true comfort from the blessings they possess.

I am not here drawing imaginary pictures of misery, or describing situations which have never existed; I could refer you to well-known examples which could amply confirm the truth of my assertions, and would clearly show that the prosperity of the wicked is no proof

* Psalm cvi. 15.

of

of their happiness; that external calamities and corporeal pains, acute sufferings, disease, or death, are not the only instrument of vengeance which the Almighty has in his hand for the correction of sinners; but that he has other engines of punishment far more terrible than these; that he can plant daggers in the breast of the most triumphant libertine; and that even when their worldly blessings are exalted, his secret dart can pierce their souls, and wring them with tortures sharper than a two-edged sword, yet invisible to every mortal eye*.

It appears, therefore, that sinners are in fact much oftener and much more severely punished than we are aware; that God is even now exercising a moral government over the world; that he is filling them with the fruits of their own devices, and chastening them in a variety of ways, not always discernible by us; admonishing some by gentle corrections to sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto them; but crushing some by severer strokes,

* "As malefactors, when they go to punishment, carry their own cross; so wickedness generally carries its own torment along with it, and is a most skilful artificer of its own misery, filling the mind with terror, remorse, and the most agonizing reflection." Plut. Ed. Xyland. v. 2. p. 554. A.

"that

" that others may hear and fear, and do no " more any such wickedness*."

Still however it must be owned, that punishment does not always overtake the offender either speedily or immediately; and therefore I proceed to show, that when this is the case, there are sufficient reasons for the delay.

It is obvious that every scheme which comprehends a great variety of intentions and views, cannot permit all of them to be accomplished at once, but some things, by no means to be omitted entirely, must however be postponed. Now such a complicated system is that of the government of the world, in which God may have many designs altogether unknown to us; and of those which we know best, we are far from being judges which it is right for him to prefer, whenever they happen to interfere†. Offenders, whom *we* are impatient to see punished as they deserve, he

* Deut. xiii. 11.

† " It is as absurd for us to blame the gods for not punishing the wicked at the time and in the manner which we think the fittest, as it would be for an ignorant clown to censure a physician for not administering the most efficacious medicines to his patient at those times which he, the said clown, judges to be the most proper." Plut. v. 2. p. 549. F.

may

may see it expedient, for various reasons, to spare. One of these reasons is given in the parable before us. When the servants of the householder represented to him that there was a great number of tares intermixed and growing up with the wheat, and asked whether they should not go and root them up; his answer was, *nay*; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat also with them. The meaning is, that, in the present imperfect scene of things, the virtuous and the wicked are so intermingled and so connected with each other, that it is frequently impossible to punish the guilty without involving the innocent in their sufferings. In the case of sinful nations, or any large bodies of men, this is very apparent. It may happen that a very considerable part of a great community may be guilty of the most enormous crimes of oppression, injustice, ambition, cruelty, murder, and impiety, and we are apt to call out for immediate and exemplary vengeance on such wretches as these. But if this vengeance was to be executed in all its extent, if this people was to be extirpated by fire and sword, or to be destroyed by famine, by pestilence, or earthquake,

quake, it is evident that great numbers of innocent persons must perish in this general wreck, and that the wheat would be rooted up with the tares. Instead therefore of censuring the dispensations of the Almighty in these instances, we ought to praise and adore him for exercising his mercy when we should have no compassion, and for sparing the wicked lest he should destroy the righteous.

But though this reasoning may be allowed in the case of guilty nations, yet it may be thought not to hold good with respect to individuals. It may be alleged, that single offenders at least may be cut off, without doing any injury to the innocent or the virtuous. But is this a fact which can at all times be safely assumed? Is the criminal, whom you wish to see chastised, a perfectly unconnected, solitary, and isolated being? Has he no wife or children, no relations, no dependents, no persons of any description, that look up to him for protection, support, or assistance? If he has, are you sure that all these persons are as worthless and as deserving of correction as himself? May they not, on the contrary, be as eminent in virtue as he is in wickedness; or

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at the least, may they not be exempt from many of those flagrant sins that call for immediate and exemplary punishment? If so, would you have these innocent, and perhaps excellent persons, involved in the ruin of the great delinquent, on whom they entirely depend? Would you have the righteous Governor of the universe make no distinction in the infliction of his punishments? Should we not rather adopt the pathetic language of Abraham, when he is pleading with the Almighty for Sodom and Gomorrah? "Wilt thou slay the righteous with the wicked? That be far from thee. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right*?" You see then that there may be the best and most substantial reasons for delaying the punishment of the wicked, both with respect to nations and individuals; and that when *we* are rashly calling out for immediate vengeance, the Judge of all the earth is full of tenderness and pity, and sees the best reasons for respiting even the most notorious offenders.

But besides this, there are other reasons for God's forbearance towards sinners. They

* Gen. xviii. 25.

are

are sometimes, as the prophet expresses it, *the rod of his anger**. He makes use of them as instruments to chastise each other, or to correct the faults of those who are much better than themselves. And it frequently happens that their punishment is only delayed till they have completely finished the work for which they were raised up, and that then they are made to justify the dispensations of the Almighty by the aweful spectacle of a conspicuous and terrifying fall.

To instance only the case of one notorious offender. That miscreant Judas Iscariot, long before he betrayed his Master, gave proofs of a most depraved and corrupt disposition. He was intrusted with the little stock that belonged in common to our Lord and the apostles; he kept the bag, and he robbed it. This flagrant breach of trust certainly deserved the severest punishment; and no doubt the disciples secretly murmured in their hearts, and condemned their divine Master for too great lenity towards so vile a wretch. But they knew not what *he* knew, that he was reserved for an important, though nefarious

* Isaiah, x. 5.

purpose,

purpose, and was to be the instrument of betraying the Saviour of the world into the hands of his murderers; a deed for which his former crimes shewed him to be perfectly well qualified. When this work of darkness was done, his doom was sealed, his punishment instantly followed: and, what increased its bitterness, it was inflicted with his own hand.

There is still another very important consideration, which may frequently occasion a delay in punishing even grievous offenders: and that is, the goodness and long-suffering of God, who is not willing that any should perish, but that all should have time for repentance.

He who looks into the hearts of men, may see various reasons for sparing those whom we would consign to immediate destruction. He may discern some good qualities in them which are unknown to us, some good dispositions and good principles, which have entirely escaped our observation. He may perceive that they have been betrayed into the crimes they have committed, more by unfortunate circumstances, by error of judgment, by mistaken zeal, by wrong education, by the solicitation and the

the influence of worthless companions, than by an incurable and inveterate depravity of heart. He may see, that amidst a multitude of vile weeds, there are still some seeds of virtue remaining in their breasts, which if duly cherished and fostered, and cultivated with care and tenderness, may produce most valuable fruits of righteousness. "He is unwilling therefore to break the bruised reed, or to quench the smoking flax*." He is unwilling to destroy what may still possibly be restored; he is unwilling to extinguish, by severity, the faintest sparks of latent goodness. He sees, in short, that if they have time for reflection, if they have space for repentance, they *will* repent, and he graciously gives them a respite for that purpose†.

And

* Matth. xii. 20.

† "Those offenders whom the Deity knows to be absolutely incurable, he destroys; but to those in whom he discovers some good dispositions, and a probability of reformation, he gives time for amendment. Thus by immediate punishment he corrects a *few*, but by sometimes delaying it he recovers and reforms *many*." Plut. v. 2. p. 551. C. D.

To this may be added another fine observation of the same author; "that God is sometimes slow in punishing the wicked, in order to teach us mortals a lesson

of

And shall we repine or murmur at this forbearance, this indulgence of God towards sinners? Are not we ourselves all of us sinners, miserable sinners: and do we think that God treats *us* with too much indulgence? Is there any one here present who would be content that God should immediately, and without mercy, inflict on him the utmost punishment which his sins justly deserve? What, alas! would become of the very best of us, if this was the case; and who could abide these judgments of the Lord? And how then can we refuse to others that mercy of which we stand so much in need ourselves?

It is evident, and we see it every day, that men who once were profligate have in time become eminently virtuous: and what pity would it have been if extreme or untimely severity had either suddenly cut them off, or hardened them in their wickedness! Great

of moderation; to repress that vehemence and precipitation with which we are sometimes impelled to avenge ourselves on those that offend us in the first heat of our passion immediately and immoderately? and to induce us to imitate that mildness, patience, and forbearance, which HE is often so merciful as to exercise towards those that have incurred his displeasure." P. 550. F.

minds are sometimes apt to fly out into excesses at their first outset, but afterwards, upon reflection, and with proper culture, rise up to the practice of the noblest virtues. And it is mercy worthy of God to exercise, and which men instead of censuring ought to admire and adore, if he chooses the milder, though slower methods, with those who are capable of being reformed by them. These sentiments cannot be better illustrated than by the example of St. Paul. That illustrious apostle was we know once, as he himself confesses, *the chief of sinners*, he was a fiery zealot, and a furious persecutor of the first Christians, breathing out continually threatening and slaughter against them, making havoc of the Church, entering into every house, and haling men and women to prison; and being, as he expresses it, exceedingly mad against them, he persecuted them unto strange cities, and when they were put to death, he gave his voice against them. In the eye of the Christian world then at that time, he must have been considered as one of the fittest objects of divine vengeance, as a persecutor and a murderer, who ought to be cut off in an instant from the face of the earth.

But

But the great Discerner of Hearts thought otherwise. He saw that all his cruelty, great as it undoubtedly was, arose, not from a disposition naturally savage and ferocious, but from ignorance, from early religious prejudices, from misguided zeal, from a firm persuasion that by these acts of severity against the first Christians he was doing God service. He saw that this same fervour of mind, this excess of zeal, properly informed and properly directed, would make him a most active and able advocate of that very cause which he had so violently opposed. Instead therefore of an extraordinary act of power to destroy him, he visibly interposed to save him. He was in a miraculous manner converted to the Christian faith, and became the principal instrument of diffusing it through the world. We see then what baneful effects would sometimes arise from the immediate punishment even of notorious delinquents. It would in this case have deprived the Christian world of the abilities, the eloquence, the indefatigable and successful exertions of this learned and intrepid apostle, whose conversion gave a strong additional evidence to the truth of the Gos-

pel, and who laid down his life for the religion he had embraced.

Yet notwithstanding all the reasons for sometimes delaying the punishment of guilt in the present world, it cannot be denied that there are some instances of prosperous wickedness, which cannot well be accounted for by any of them; and therefore, for a complete vindication of the moral government of God, we must have recourse to the concluding part of the parable, which will give us the fullest satisfaction on this interesting subject. To the question of the servants, whether they should gather up the tares from the midst of the wheat, the householder answers, "Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat also. Let both grow together until the harvest, and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn." The harvest, our Lord tells us in his explanation, is the end of the world, at which awful period the Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall "gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity,

quity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear*."

Here then is the great master-key to the whole of this mysterious dispensation of Heaven. God, we see, has appointed a day when every deficiency in his administration shall be supplied, and every seeming disproportion and inequality shall be rectified†.

Even in this world it appears that wickedness is punished in some measure, and to a certain degree: and we have seen that the interests of virtue itself, among other considerations, require that it should not be instantly

* Matth. xiii. 41, 42, 43.

† "As the soul survives the dissolution of the body, (says the excellent Plutarch,) and exists after death, it is most probable that it will receive rewards and punishments in a future state; for it goes through a kind of contest during the present life, and when that is over, it will have its due recompence hereafter." 561. A.

How nearly does this approach to the doctrine of the Gospel which had been promulgated near one hundred years before Plutarch wrote. But thanks be to God, what this great man thought only probable, *we* have the happiness of knowing to be certain.

punished

punished to the full extent of its deserts. God is perpetually showing, even in the present life, his different regard to right and wrong, by every such method as the constitution of the world which he has created admits; and therefore no sooner shall that world come to an end, and all obstacles to an equal administration of justice be taken out of the way, than he shall come to execute righteous judgment upon earth.

"He is not slack as men count slackness*," that is, negligent and remiss; he only waits for the proper season of doing all that hitherto remains undone. Human weakness indeed, by a small delay of punishing, may lose the power of doing it for ever. "But in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength†." Human inconstancy may be vehement and passionate at first; then negligent and languid. The sense of an unworthy action that does not injure us, quickly wears out of our mind; and if we take no immediate notice of it, we shall possibly take none at all. But we must not think God to be such a one as ourselves. Eternity itself will make no change in *his* abhorrence of wicked-

* 2 Pet. iii. 9. † Isaiah xxvi. 4.

ness,

ness, nor will any thing either transport him to act before his appointed time, or prevail upon him to give a respite when that time comes. The sinners of the antediluvian world, abusing the long space of one hundred and twenty years which he allowed for their repentance, perished at the end of it without mercy. The angels who fell from their first estate before this earth was created, he has reserved for torments, that shall not finally take place till it is consumed*.

The same important period his infinite wisdom has marked out for the final judgment of men. And undoubtedly it *may* produce advantages of unspeakable moment thus to defer justice, with a design of rendering some chosen parts of duration memorable throughout the universe, by a more extensive and illustrious exercise of it. For it must needs make an inconceivably strong and lasting impression upon every order of beings that shall then be present at the solemn scene, to hear the final doom of a whole world pronounced at once; and to behold sins that had been committed thousands of years before, punished with the same attention to every circumstance as if they had been but of yesterday.

* Jude vi. 2 Pet. ii. 4.

How

How far off these judgments of the Lord may be, we none of us know. But with regard to ourselves, they are near, they are even at the door. The few days we have to pass in this transient scene will determine our condition for ever, and bring us into an eternal state, compared with which the continuance of the present frame of nature, from its very beginning, will be as nothing. Then every act of the government of God will be seen in its true light; the magnified length of distance between guilt and its punishment will totally disappear; and offenders will lament in vain that sentence is executed so *speedily* as it is against evil works. But with peculiar severity will it be executed on them, who, despising the riches of that goodness which would lead them to repentance, "treasure up for themselves wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*."

Upon the whole then let not either the sinner triumph, or the virtuous repine, at the apparent impunity or even prosperity of the wicked in the present life. To the audacious sinner we apply those most apposite and most

* Rom. ii. 5.

awful

awful words of the son of Sirach. "Say not, who shall control me for my works, for the Lord shall surely avenge thy pride. Say not, I have sinned, and what harm hath happened unto me; for the Lord is indeed long-suffering, but he will in no wise let thee go. Say not, his mercy is great, he will be pacified for the multitude of my sins; for both mercy and wrath come from him, and his indignation resteth upon sinners. Make therefore no tarrying to turn unto the Lord, and put not off from day to day; for suddenly shall the wrath of the Lord come forth, and in thy security shalt thou be destroyed, and perish in the day of vengeance*."

To the religious and virtuous on the other hand we say, "Fret not thyself because of the ungodly, neither be thou envious against the evil doers. Hold thee still in the Lord, and abide patiently upon him; but grieve not thyself at him whose way doth prosper, against the man that doeth after evil counsels. Wicked doers shall be rooted out; and they that patiently abide the Lord, those shall inherit the land †." "Be patient therefore, brethren,

* Eccles. v. 3—7. † Psalm xxxvii. 7—9.

unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and the latter rain. Be ye also patient; for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh *."

It is not indeed always an easy task to exercise this patience, when we see conspicuous instances either of individuals or of nations, notorious for their profligacy, triumphant and prosperous in all their ways. We can scarce repress our discontent, or forbear joining with the prophet in his expostulation with the Almighty, "Righteous art thou, O Lord! yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Why do the ways of the wicked prosper? Why are all they happy that deal very treacherously †?" To this we can now answer in the words of Job: "Knowest thou not this, since man was placed upon earth, that the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite but for a moment? Though his excellency mount unto the heavens, and his head reach unto the clouds; yet he shall perish for ever, and they that have seen him shall say, Where is he ‡?"

* James v. 7, 8. † Jerem. xii. 1. ‡ Job xx. 5, 6, 7.

In

In fact it has been proved, in the course of this inquiry, that in such an immense and complicated system as that of the universe, there are many reasons which we can discern, and a thousand others perhaps totally unknown to us, which render it necessary that the virtuous should suffer a temporary depression, and the wicked enjoy a temporary triumph. But let not these apparent irregularities dispirit or discourage us: for whenever the purposes of Providence in these mysterious dispensations shall have been accomplished, every disorder shall be rectified, and every appearance of injustice done away. The time and the season for doing this, God has reserved in his own power; and we must not presume to prescribe rules to the wisdom of the Almighty. To men excruciated with pain, every moment seems an age; and to men groaning under oppression, their deliverance, if it come not instantly, may seem extremely distant. But let them not despair: in due season they shall reap, if they faint not. At the period marked out by infinite wisdom, and which it is their duty to await with patience, God shall cause his judgment to be heard from heaven,

and

and the earth shall tremble and be still. He shall then demonstrate to the whole world "that his hand is not shortened that it cannot redeem, and that he still retains the power to save*." He shall prove, in a manner the most awful and most satisfactory, "that verily there is a reward for the righteous, and a punishment for the wicked; that doubtless there is a God that judgeth the earth†."

* Isaiah, chaps. 1. & 2. † Psalm lviii. 11.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

Luke Hanfard, Printer,
Great Turnstile, Lincoln's-Inn Fields.